SELF-INTEREST, MORALITY, AND THE GOOD LIFE

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Self-Interest, Morality, and the Good Life

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

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Ever since Socrates debated Thrasyemachus in Plato’s Republic there has seemed to be a potential conflict between morality and self-interest. Paul Bloomfield is a contemporary philosopher who has recently written a book contributing to this debate. He thinks he has arguments which show that the moral skeptic or selfish egoist (who thinks that a life of immorality focused on her own narrow self-interest leads to the Good Life) is wrong even on the basis of assumptions that she herself holds. A life of immorality is really self-undermining since it works against the individual being happy and living the Good Life. This is similar to Plato’s argument in the Republic, though he makes the connection through the harmony of the soul and the discord that immorality brings. Bloomfield thinks that a more Kantian argument that makes the link through self-respect will fare better. He argues that immorality is always damaging to the self-respect of the individual, where self-respect is necessary for happiness.

I will argue that Bloomfield does not succeed, at least in the sense that his arguments do not show the egoist to be wrong in a completely non-question-begging way as he claims. I also sketch a reconstruction of this argument meant to be an improvement in response to my criticisms of Bloomfield. Where the original argument focused on humanity as the ground of self-respect, I think the skeptic can regard this as a fact external to her life without being self-defeating. However, she must regard rational agency as internal to her life and necessary for her self-respect. So if we can show that immorality damages one’s self-respect, then the skeptic has reason to avoid it even if she only cares about her own self-interest.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In this essay I will be talking about the potential conflict between self-interest and morality, and how this relates to the Good Life. Paul Bloomfield, in his recent book *The Virtues of Happiness*, argues that when morality is understood in its proper relation to the Good Life, we will see that the moral choice is always the one that leads to the best life for the individual. I will be arguing against this claim in a number of related ways. First I argue that Bloomfield fails at convincing the moral skeptic completely non-question-beggingly. Then I argue that the argument can be re-interpreted less ambitiously, but that its acceptance will still depend on some substantive claims about the Good Life that are not included in Bloomfield’s account. Then I attempt to extend Bloomfield’s account using some Kantian ideas from contemporary philosopher Christine Korsgaard. I will argue that this extension does a better job against the skeptic, though it still falls short of providing decisive and overriding reasons to be moral in every possible situation.

This essay is divided into five chapters. Chapter 1 is the introduction. In Chapter 2 I present Bloomfield’s argument. In Chapter 3 I criticize his account and argue that it fails to establish its very strong conclusion. In Chapter 4 I give the beginnings of a reconstruction of that argument in light of my critique, where I try to show that it may do some work even though it ultimately does not succeed as ambitiously as Bloomfield had hoped. Chapter 5 is the conclusion.
First a few paragraphs to introduce the general topic. The philosophical background no doubt extends back before the time of Plato, but we will begin our discussion with him. In the *Republic* Socrates must defend justice against the sophist Thrasymachus, who challenges Socrates in the first book to reconcile the apparent conflict between the claims that (1) justice is a virtue, where virtues benefit their possessors, and (2) justice sometimes requires that one act for the benefit of another at the expense of oneself.¹ If this conflict cannot be resolved, then it is not always the case that an individual deliberating about what is best for his or her own self-interest will arrive at the decision that is in line with what conventional morality seems to require.

Plato/Socrates does want to defend the claim that justice always pays, or that an individual who wants his or her life to go as well as possible should always do the moral thing. Nowhere is this more obvious than the behavior of Socrates in the *Crito*, where he would rather be executed than go against the laws of his city (an immoral act as he sees it). For Socrates “the most important thing is not life, but the good life”, where the good life is the same as the moral life.² Plato espouses the same view in the *Laws*: “We do not hold the common view that a man’s highest good is to survive and simply continue to exist. His highest good is to become as virtuous as possible and to continue to exist in that state as long as life lasts.”³ Hence, in order to have the best life an individual should always do what morality requires, no matter what.

² Ibid., 42.
³ Ibid., 1394.
Plato argued in the *Republic* that the apparent conflict between self-interest and justice could be resolved by showing that injustice is always harmful to its perpetrator, even when it seems like it has lots of benefits. He did this by using the idea of psychic harmony. Unjust behavior disrupts the psychic harmony of the individual, and this negative effect outweighs any potential gains that might result from this behavior.⁴ So even if it may seem like the unjust individual has an advantage in terms of external goods, the internal disruption that results is never worth it. If the person had been thinking clearly he or she would have seen that this must always be the case; there is always sufficient reason to do the moral thing even from the point of view of the individual’s own self-interest.

Bloomfield introduces his central topic by conceding that “it has never seemed unreasonable to see morality as it was portrayed in Plato’s *Republic*.”⁵ This type of concern is an intuitive one that is easy to grasp: if people were able to be sure of getting away with conventional acts of immorality like cheating and stealing (like in the Ring of Gyges myth), then it would seem to be in their individual self-interest to do so. This makes it seem like we only agree to be moral in the hopes of preventing others from wronging us, but if we could get the benefits of being immoral with impunity then we would do so (or maybe should do so if all we cared about was our own narrow self-interest). So the best situation would be one in which we could ‘get away with’ immoral acts and get the benefits from them without being punished. Hence morality is a sham and if one wants the best for oneself one ought to be immoral if it can be done without getting caught. Since this problem seems so easy to come

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⁴ Plato, *Complete Works*, 1076.

by, it is often thought that the burden of proof is on the one who tries to argue that, appearances to the contrary, this is never really the case.

In many ways the debate that Plato frames between Socrates and Thrasyilmachus is similar to the one that Bloomfield frames in this book between what he calls the Foscos and the Hartrights, as we will see below. In some respects these two philosophers are taking on the same project and using similar types of arguments for their conclusions. We will see in the next chapter that Bloomfield also argues that immorality is always harmful to its perpetrator. He is aware of how this relates back to what Plato was trying to achieve. However, Bloomfield thinks that contemporary ideas (derived from Kant) about self-respect do a better job than Plato’s psychic harmony in explaining how this works.
CHAPTER 2

BLOOMFIELD’S ARGUMENT

Now begins a detailed exposition of Bloomfield’s position in *The Virtues of Happiness*. I will start with a few paragraphs on Bloomfield’s setup and general goal. Then I will get into the details of how he makes his argument. I spend a lot of time explicating Bloomfield’s approach because I think he does succeed very well in setting up the debate as neutrally as possible. Even though I think his ambitious argument ultimately fails, as I will argue in Chapter 3, in Chapter 4 I try to adopt the basic setup in light of my criticisms to see how strong of an argument we can make with some changes to the argument. I think the reconstruction given there stays true to the basic setup but does a better job at showing the cost of immorality directly to the skeptic.

So Bloomfield thinks that the challenge to morality posed by people like Thrasymachus and Glaucon is a natural one, and one to be taken seriously by those who wish to defend morality in the face of extreme self-interest. He references the way that Philippa Foot famously put the challenge: “[I]f justice is not a good to the just man, moralists who recommend it as a virtue are perpetrating a fraud.” 6 Bloomfield aims to take up this challenge by showing that morality is the best (and indeed the only) way to live a Good Life (which is a happy life). He attempts to do so ‘ambitiously’, where “modest arguments are based on

premises that egoists do not accept, while the ambitious ones are based on premises that egoists do accept.” So Bloomfield aims to show that the egoist is living poorly even on the basis of his or her own beliefs about what is good. In this way he hopes to give a dialectically neutral, non-question-begging argument against the immoralist which shows that he or she ought to change sides. This would shift the burden of proof from the moralist to the egoist, which represents an improvement in the history of philosophy since morality is usually thought to be on the defensive against those who argue that immorality is really in the self-interest of the individual.  

Bloomfield summarizes his main argument in a paragraph:

The book’s setup and arguments are intended to show that living morally is not only justified but, indeed, is the only way of living that leads to happiness and the Good Life. … The strategy of the book is to wed the ancient sense of ‘happiness’ or ‘the Good Life’ that we take from the Greek *eudaimonia* to a contemporary sense of ‘self-respect’ derived from work by Kant. Starting with these conceptual tools, it follows that whenever immorality is disrespectful to its victims, it is to the same degree self-disrespecting to its perpetrators. Since all parties to the debate agree that people cannot be happy and live the Good Life without self-respect, the justificatory tables turn, and those who have attacked morality end up having to defend the misshapen position in which true happiness requires lacking self-respect. 

Bloomfield takes as his dialectical opponents the type of immoralist or egoist continuing the attack on morality represented by Thrasymachus and the type of moralist defending morality like Socrates in the *Republic*. The egoist takes his own self-interest to be of overriding concern without regard for traditional moral values like not being unfair to others. For this type of person this constitutes eudaimonia or happiness. Bloomfield thinks

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8 Ibid., 57.
9 Ibid., 4.
such a person exemplifies the kind of extreme egoist or moral skeptic that we have seen in philosophy’s history in characters like Thrasymachus, Callicles, or Hume’s Sensible Knave. Throughout the book Bloomfield’s stand-in for this kind of dialectical opponent is referred to as the ‘Fosco’ after the literary character Count Fosco in the 1860 Wilkie Collins mystery novel *The Woman in White*. “Egoists tell us that if our goal is really to live the best life possible, and if morality requires us to make sacrifices to the quality of our lives for the sake of others, then, whenever it is most convenient, we should forsake morality and pursue self-interest.”\textsuperscript{10} Such a person will be wholly partial to his own self-interest, even if that includes such things as cheating or abusing other people to get what he wants. The main concern of this individual that trumps all others is that his own life go as well as possible for himself, regardless of how this affects anyone else. The ultimate question to be considered when deciding on a course of action would always be ‘What’s in it for me?’

Bloomfield realizes that traditional moralists will also oppose his solution to the conflict between self-interest and morality. On this view, “morality is conceptualized independently of self-interest and always trumps it.”\textsuperscript{11} Any consideration that is ‘moral’ will be concerned with our obligations to other people, which will always have overriding priority over any self-regarding thoughts or desires we may have. Such considerations must be wholly impartial in this sense to qualify as distinctly ‘moral’. A moralist of this stripe would never choose any self-interested action if it conflicted with a moral action, no matter what the relative measure of either consideration was. Bloomfield thinks of these members of the

\textsuperscript{10} Bloomfield, *The Virtues of Happiness*, 13.

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid., 5.
dialogue as continuing the tradition of Socrates from the Republic. They are referred to as ‘Hartrights’, after the hero of The Woman in White who ends up besting Count Fosco.

On this account, we must always ‘do the right thing’. We “ought always to do our duty, regardless of what we may want to do, and even when doing the right thing works against our self-interest.”¹² For people who hold this view the question ‘What’s in it for me?’ is never the most relevant consideration when deciding on a course of action and can always be overridden by the least important conflicting ‘moral’ consideration. In this paper I will be mainly interested in criticizing Bloomfield’s account from the point of view of the Fosco. I will not say much about criticisms that could come from the other side.

Bloomfield thinks that both extreme ends of the spectrum represented by these two opponents are incorrect, since “the moralist’s full impartiality is just as improper as the egoist’s full partiality.”¹³ So his account of morality involves re-construing the territory of ‘morality’ in a way that balances partiality and impartiality. He notes that “both the egoist and the moralist assume that self-interest and morality are characteristically, even conceptually, set against each other,” and claims that “[d]efeating this assumption is the first important goal of this book.”¹⁴ Instead of seeing morality in a way that contrasts it with self-interest, Bloomfield takes it that “morality is conceptually set against making poor choices and living badly.”¹⁵

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¹² Bloomfield, The Virtues of Happiness, 12.
¹³ Ibid., 5.
¹⁴ Ibid.
¹⁵ Ibid., 6.
This is a part of Bloomfield’s account that I think he does well, and I will end up supporting a version of his denial of the assumption that morality and self-interest are always conceptually set against each other. As we will see, Bloomfield thinks that in all cases there is never the potential for real conflict between morality and self-interest; if you really understand things then you will see that the moral thing to do is always the one that most furthers your own self-interest. I will argue that Bloomfield doesn’t succeed so completely, but that a reconstructed argument will give very good reason to think that we can go a long way in that direction.

According to Bloomfield, “[t]he book’s main thesis is that living morally or virtuously is necessary and sufficient for people to live as happily as possible, given who they are and their circumstances.”16 He thinks that even the Fosco will agree to the premises and so the Fosco is committed to the conclusion whether he realizes it or not. The premises of the main argument of the book are two: (1) Morality (as the output of all-things-considered judgments about the best way to live) is necessary for self-respect and (2) Self-respect is necessary for happiness. From these premises there follows the conclusion: Morality is necessary for happiness. So the Fosco’s position is shown to be self-defeating since it amounts to a life of immorality when he has implicitly agreed that immorality damages the self-respect that is necessary for a happy life. This fits Bloomfield’s earlier claim that it is not enough to defeat the Fosco to show that immorality is irrational or

16 Bloomfield, The Virtues of Happiness, 6.
unreasonable. Instead he argues for the stronger claim that the Fosco’s position is self-defeating or self-undermining since immorality prevents one’s living well.

We will now begin examining Bloomfield’s position in detail, starting with his account of morality. Bloomfield denies one common account of morality: that it is essentially social, resulting in obligations that are strictly impartial and do not take into account the interests of the individual agent. He thinks that if this social conception of morality is taken as a given then there cannot be any satisfactory resolution of the conflict between self-interest and morality.

The stalemate between the two positions has occurred because the moralists and the egoists share a conception of morality that is ultimately flawed, in which morality is primarily, if not wholly, an inter-personal, other-regarding, social phenomenon. … If one conceives of morality as fundamentally or even analytically social, then a division, a competition, is automatically established between ‘moral’ considerations and what is in a person’s ‘self-interest’.

So, for Bloomfield, the only hope of resolving this conflict is to start with a conception of morality that does not set up the problem in a way that is implicitly impossible to solve. On this account, there can of course be conflicts between self-regarding and other-regarding considerations.

But the right or best way to approach this conflict is not to say that the nature of the values at hand are different, that moral considerations are purely other-regarding and therefore have a different sort of value and authority than self-interested, prudential considerations: we ought not to conceive of the problem as one between different kinds of value, the moral on one side and the prudential on the other, or as one between different kinds of reasons with intrinsically different ‘weight’.

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17 Ibid., 3.
18 Bloomfield, The Virtues of Happiness, 16.
19 Ibid., 21-22.
If we do buy into what Bloomfield calls the traditional conception of morality, we are left with “a conception of practical rationality that has a built-in schism between the demands of morality and those of self-interest.”

According to Bloomfield, “our only chance of solving the problem is to adopt a unified theory of practical reason and a conception of morality cast in terms of what truly leads to the Good Life.” This means that for Bloomfield practical rationality “is a much broader notion encompassing all the deliberative procedures by which people make practical decisions in their lives” which “includes instrumental rationality but goes beyond it by allowing us to deliberate about which ends to pursue.”

According to Bloomfield, living morally is “judging wisely what is truly good and valuable as such, and then acting accordingly.” When we ask what the moral thing to do is, we are asking what the objectively best thing to do is when self-regarding and other-regarding considerations are both taken into account.

When morality is not defined in contrast to self-interest but rather as the content of our true, all-things-properly-considered judgments about what to do and how to live and what sort of person to be, things unfold rather more smoothly. When all self-regarding and other-regarding considerations are deliberated under the umbrella of practical moral reasoning, it becomes easy to see how interconnected, how inextricably bound together they actually are. We find no prejudice toward the impartial point of view, as we do in moralism, and none of egoism’s prejudice toward the self.

The moral thing to do will be whatever we truly ought to do when all the relevant facts have been considered. “The truth about morality, the truth about how one ought to live,

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20 Ibid., 24.
22 Ibid.
23 Ibid., 7.
24 Ibid., 28.
is simply the truth about how one ought to reason practically and behave in order to live a Good Life.”

Morality on this scheme will still cover much of the ground of traditional morality since the truth about morality is taken to be “the correct answer to the question, ‘how ought I to live?”, which will obviously include an answer to, ‘how ought I to treat others?” However, considerations which were traditionally considered ‘moral’ will not have any special, overriding force. This keeps the Fosco in the game, since he would regard the traditional definition of ‘morality’ as a question-begging way of setting up the debate. This definition of morality can at least be agreed upon by both sides of the debate, and the rest of the argumentation will be about the extension of the term.

To put it another way, the only special status which now accrues to morality is that which comes along with being the output of an ‘all-things-considered’ judgment. … ‘[O]ther-regarding considerations’ no longer have special authority as ‘moral’ considerations. … On the present view, the morally correct prescription for action has only the authority of being the right or best thing to do, all things considered; no ‘special’ authority is required to trump self-interest because self-interest is already figured in. If one lives morally, one will live the best life possible: that fact constitutes all the authority morality has and needs.

Bloomfield thinks that one of the benefits of setting up the debate in this way is that “it makes us see that how we treat others is inextricably bound up with how we treat ourselves, and vice versa. As we shall see, the respect involved in ‘respect for others’ and ‘self-respect’ is the same; having self-respect carries implications for respecting others.” If this is right then the conflict is set up in such a way that no normative questions have been begged, and it will be at least possible that the Fosco could have neutral reasons, on his own

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25 Ibid., 29.
27 Ibid., 40-41.
28 Ibid., 43.
view of narrow self-interest, to be moved by moral considerations. Now that we’ve seen the
details of how Bloomfield has structured the debate, we can turn to examining two specific
arguments that he gives in support of this claim.

Although I will argue that these two arguments do not ultimately succeed
ambitiously, I do think that Bloomfield’s setup is the best there could be for these types of
arguments for morality. If such arguments could persuade the skeptic without begging the
question, then this really would attain Bloomfield’s goal of the “Holy Grail of moral
philosophy.”29 However, if no argument from this setup could succeed, then this shows that
this is as far as we could go with these kinds of ambitious arguments. This would effectively
‘set the limits’ of what we could hope to achieve against the skeptic, and it would also show
what else would be needed in order to succeed. As we will see, one thing would be a more
robust theory of the Good Life. However, the skeptic would likely see this as question-
begging. So unless we have an independent argument that convinces the skeptic of that
theory, this is a real limitation on the efficacy of these types of arguments.

In any case, back to Bloomfield’s arguments. He gives two related arguments
pertaining to self-respect and its connection to happiness. He thinks that both sides of the
debate would agree that self-respect is necessary for happiness; it seems clear that people
who hate themselves cannot be living a very good life, and even the Fosco will almost surely
agree with this. “Close to this agreed rejection of self-hatred is an agreement that people
cannot live as good a life as possible if they do not respect themselves. Both sides, one would

29 Bloomfield, The Virtues of Happiness, 3.
think, would agree with the idea that people who go around behaving in ways that are self-disrespecting cannot be living the Good Life.”

Bloomfield notes that there are two claims here: “the first is the idea that self-respect is necessary to the Good Life, at least insofar as we cannot imagine a person who lacks self-respect living a Good Life; and the second is that people can be wrong about whether or not they have self-respect.” Though I think that both of these claims are true in a sense, I will later argue that they aren’t really true in the way that Bloomfield needs in order to make these claims relevant to his argument.

Bloomfield also makes the further argument that morality is necessary for self-respect. He agrees with the Platonic idea that immorality is harmful to the person who engages in it. But instead of explaining this in terms of psychic harmony he cashes it out in terms of self-respect. Combining this claim with the previous one allows him to argue by way of hypothetical syllogism: “(1) Morality is necessary for self-respect. (2) Self-respect is necessary for happiness. (3) Therefore, morality is necessary for happiness.”

Bloomfield wants his argument to be dialectically neutral in that it is based on premises that both sides of the debate already agree to. He takes it that the Fosco would likely agree to premise (2), that self-respect is necessary for happiness. This seems reasonable: just explaining exactly what self-respect and happiness are may be the best argument for this premise. What seems much more dialectically difficult is to get the Fosco to agree to premise (1), that morality is necessary for self-respect. Indeed, it is characteristic

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30 Ibid., 46.
31 Bloomfield, *The Virtues of Happiness*, 47.
32 Ibid., 6.
of the Fosco’s position that he typically sees no problem with cheating others to get what he wants. Bloomfield gives two main arguments in support of the claim that immorality is nevertheless harmful to the life of its perpetrator: the argument from ontology and the argument from epistemology.

**The Argument from Ontology**

We will start with the argument from ontology. In order to see clearly where Bloomfield is going, we might put the outline of it in schematic form like this:

1. Self-respect is necessary for happiness.
2. So self-disrespect is harmful to the happiness of the individual.
3. Immorality is disrespectful to the humanity of the victim.
4. But this humanity is an essential property of the perpetrator no less than the victim.
5. Hence, immorality is self-disrespectful to the perpetrator.
6. Therefore, immorality is harmful to the happiness of its perpetrator.

The usual appeal of immorality lies in getting the things that one wants without having to do it the hard or honest way. However, Bloomfield claims that immorality does not really deliver in the end since any ‘success’ gained by immoral means is not really success at all, only a fraudulent shadow of genuine success. As he puts it: “Defenders of immorality must fool themselves into thinking there is no difference between winning ‘fair and square’ and ‘winning’ by cheating.”\(^{33}\) He gives the example of the college diploma of a student who routinely cheated:

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\(^{33}\) Bloomfield, *The Virtues of Happiness*, 58.
In one sense it is a ‘real’ diploma, since it was officially issued by the college, but in another, more important sense it is a fake: the acquisition of learning and knowledge it is supposed to represent was not, in fact, obtained. The underlying weakness and dupery will always be there at root, and no amount of self-deception or the deception of others will change this. … The self-deception spoils what it infects: the cheater’s putative success is not in fact genuine. … A better sort of life is one in which goals are attained without cheating the way through: there is no real success with cheating, only an inverted comma sense of ‘success’, only a superficial simulacrum of the real thing.\textsuperscript{34}

So, just as a diploma based on cheating is not a genuine diploma but only a fraud, a life based on immorality cannot be a genuinely good life (or a happy one, since for Bloomfield these are the same). In the next chapter I will challenge this analogy, in particular the fact that a college diploma is supposed to ‘represent’ something beyond itself, while a life need not be similar in this regard.

The Fosco is aware of the general distinction between appearance and reality. As Bloomfield notes, this is usually part of the Fosco’s criticism of the opposing side: the moralists have an incorrect view of the world and this causes them to be duped into unnecessarily sacrificing their own interests for those of others. So the Fosco owes an explanation for why this apparent appearance/reality distinction (between ‘winning’ through cheating and really winning, between being moral and immoral) can be ignored. I will also criticize this claim in the next chapter, because even if the general appearance/reality distinction is granted, it is a further question of whether it should be applied in this specific case.

Bloomfield thinks that if we really understand self-respect and how this ties in with morality and the Good Life, then we will see that this distinction cannot actually be ignored,

\textsuperscript{34} Bloomfield, \textit{The Virtues of Happiness}, 58-59.
because to do so is to act in ways that are self-disrespecting. Since it is agreed that self-respect is necessary for the Good Life, the Fosco must admit that things which are self-disrespecting are to be avoided. In other words, if Bloomfield can successfully (in a non-question-begging way) show that immorality is harmful to self-respect, then the Fosco must admit that he has good reason to not be immoral. Furthermore, this reason will be (at least partly) self-interested, so the Fosco would have to agree to it in order to live the Good Life even on his own terms (where his own self-interest is taken to be overridingly the most important thing).

Bloomfield begins his argument for immorality being self-disrespecting with some general considerations about respect. He thinks that the word ‘respect’ in the phrases ‘respect for others’ and ‘respect for oneself’ is univocal.

Respect is respect … and it involves a particular set of judgments, attitudes, and responses. Presumably, when we respect something properly, we see it for what it is, for having the value it does, and we treat it with the honor and/or deference that our judgments tell us is due to it. … [T]here would be something incoherent or inconsistent about respecting one thing for having some attributes and disrespecting another despite its having the same attributes as the first. When it comes to respect, we ought to treat equals as equals, and like cases alike; something has gone awry if we do not. 35

The Fosco often insists on treating himself as a special case and engaging in actions which, whether consciously or not, demonstrate that he grants himself more respect than he grants to other people. For example, he may decide to cheat another person out of her just due in an effort to increase his own self-interest. Bloomfield thinks that if this difference in respect granted is not grounded in some relevant difference between the two cases, then the Fosco will be reasoning inconsistently. The Fosco would then be making a mistake in not

35 Bloomfield, The Virtues of Happiness, 59-60.
valuing things in the proper way, since his judgments of value would be arbitrary. This arbitrariness would leave any and all of his judgments suspect, and hence he would be left with no good reasons for his self-prejudicing attitudes or actions. Consequently his self-respect would be undermined.

Bloomfield’s argument makes use of a distinction in types of respect: ‘appraisal respect’ and ‘recognition respect’. “Appraisal respect is based on the actions, achievements, intellect, or character of a person.” So different people will merit different amounts and types of appraisal respect based on the traits that they have. Recognition respect is different, though, since it sets a baseline level of respect that is due to all things of a certain kind. “Recognition respect is given based on the type of thing being recognized: a particular token belongs to a type, and by virtue of being a token of that type deserves to be recognized and treated as what it is.” Failing to grant the proper amount of recognition respect is failing to value things as they really are.

The Fosco will tend to not give much regard to recognition respect when it comes to other people. Since he will typically engage in conventionally immoral actions, this shows that he does not think that people should be granted the respect required to provide a sufficient reason to not use them as mere tools to further one’s own selfish ends. However, the Fosco will usually grant himself (and perhaps others) a lot of appraisal respect based on the possession of qualities which the Fosco values. Foscos “typically think that people

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37 Ibid.
deserve respect for what they are able to do or get, how powerful or clever they are, and how
good they are at making happen what they want to happen.”\(^{38}\)

Now, since ‘respect’ in ‘self-respect’ and ‘respect for others’ is univocal, similar
judgments should be made whether an individual is evaluating the respect owed to oneself or
the respect owed to another person. In order for the judgments to be non-arbitrary (and hence
reason-giving) the standards of appraisal must be the same in both cases. Bloomfield thinks
that this forces the Fosco into a dilemma which shows that his self-respect can only be
grounded on a fraudulent basis.

If the Foscos accept the existence of recognition respect, then they would have to
acknowledge that they do not act toward others in accordance with it, and this
would imply that if they grant recognition respect to themselves (recognition self-
respect), they are failing to treat like cases alike. On the other hand, if they deny
the existence of recognition respect, then they have to deny that people are not
merely instruments, which implies that they deny part of what makes them be
who they are as individuals and makes them be more than mere instruments.
Either way, their self-respect will be at least in part founded on a fraudulent basis,
since they act in a way that is actually self-disrespecting when they fail to
recognize others as being deserving of respect.\(^{39}\)

So the Fosco either fails to judge like cases alike and so shows his self-respect to be
fraudulent, or he must deny part of what makes him be more than a mere instrument, which
also makes his self-respect fraudulent. This damage to self-respect is the damage of
immorality. It provides a reason to not be immoral even in self-interested terms, since the
Fosco agrees that self-respect is necessary for happiness and the Good Life.

Bloomfield notes that this argument relies on an assumption about personal identity.
This assumption is one that I will challenge later.

\(^{38}\) Ibid., 62.

\(^{39}\) Bloomfield, The Virtues of Happiness, 62-63.
This is the idea that who we are, our personal identities, are constituted by some traits that we uniquely have, such as having some particular parents or configuration of DNA, and other traits which we share with others, like being a human being, a male or a female, and so on. If we understand an ‘essential property’ as one without which an item would cease to exist, then our personal identities are constituted by essential properties, some of which are unique to us and some of which we share with others. The argument to come works on the idea that when people act immorally toward others, this implies a disrespectful attitude toward those properties that make the victims who they are as individuals; the immorality that is perpetrated implies that none of those properties count as a sufficient reason for perpetrators to refrain from treating victims immorally. But some of the essential properties of the victim are also essential properties of the perpetrator, implying that when perpetrators act with a lack of respect for those properties (by not treating them as a sufficient reason for refraining from the immorality) they ipso facto act with a lack of respect for those properties as they partly constitute the perpetrator’s own identity. Insofar as this is true, the perpetrator’s actions are self-disrespecting.\(^{40}\)

Bloomfield thinks that there could be a few different candidates for an essential property that grounds recognition respect for people: rationality, agency, and humanity being obvious options. He thinks that humanity works best, especially when it comes to children, the elderly, and the disabled. “Our humanity is absolutely central to us and is by itself sufficient to make us unfit to be property or to be treated as mere instruments or tools.”\(^{41}\) This biological kind (being a member of *Homo sapiens*) that we belong to puts us all in the same boat and warrants a recognition respect based on being a token of this type. “All humans have something in common with each other, and what we have in common is also essential to each of our own particular identities, such that we could not be who we are as individuals were we not human beings.”\(^{42}\) This means that failing to treat other humans with proper respect is really at bottom self-disrespecting.

\(^{40}\) Bloomfield, *The Virtues of Happiness*, 63-64.

\(^{41}\) Ibid., 65.

\(^{42}\) Ibid., 68.
Bloomfield presents a line of inference meant to show that when a person disrespects another human being, he or she disrespects him or herself:

1. If Xavier disrespects Yves, this implies that Xavier does not take anything about Yves as a sufficient reason for refraining from the disrespect.

2. This implies that when Xavier disrespects Yves, Xavier disrespects what makes Yves be the person he is.

3. What makes Yves be the person he is are his essential properties.

4. Therefore, when Xavier disrespects Yves, Xavier disrespects Yves’ essential properties.

5. If Xavier has in common with Yves any essential properties, then Xavier’s disrespect of Yves implies that Xavier is ipso facto acting disrespectful toward those aspects or essential properties of himself that he has in common with Yves.

6. Yves and Xavier each essentially have in common the property of being a human being.

7. Therefore, by (1) – (6), when Xavier disrespects Yves, Xavier is disrespecting himself.\(^4^3\)

So the disrespect of immorality is disrespect to the victim’s humanity, since people who commit immoral actions incorrectly act on the presumption that a person’s humanity is not sufficient reason to keep from using him as a mere means to an end. But this humanity is also an essential property of the perpetrator, hence immoral acts are really self-disrespecting. So, in addition to being disrespecting to the victim, immoral acts are also disrespecting to the perpetrator. “The harm of being immoral is that it keeps one from seeing the value of human life, and if one is human, then one is kept from seeing the value of one’s own life.”\(^4^4\) This means that immoral acts work against the immoral person’s ability to live well. Since the

\(^4^3\) Bloomfield, *The Virtues of Happiness*, 69.

\(^4^4\) Ibid., 72.
Fosco has purely self-interested reasons to live well, immoral acts are actually self-undermining even on the Fosco’s own position.

In the next chapter I will have a lot of criticisms directed at Bloomfield’s decision to take humanity as the ground of respect, since I don’t think this is the best option to give as much force to the argument from ontology as possible. In the final chapter I will offer a reconstruction of this argument in terms of reflective agency, since I think this works better at providing a cost to the skeptic. I think that an argument which forces one to give up thinking of oneself as an agent has more bite than one which requires one to give up thinking of oneself as human. Part of the reason is that one could still be a reflective agent without being human, while one could not have the most important qualities of humanity without being a reflective agent. If I’m right about that then agency is really the more fundamental property and the one that would be the worst to lose.

Now, I do not mean to imply that the Fosco need necessarily deny that he is a human being (a member of the biological kind *Homo sapiens*). What he may deny is that this fact about him is essential to his identity, or that it is the only salient consideration that could ground respect, or that he need care about it. These are separate claims from the highly dubious and costly claim that the Fosco does not think he is a human being. These claims will have their own costs or implications, but in terms of avoiding Bloomfield’s super ambitious argument the only absolutely necessary implication that they cannot have is that they are self-undermining to the individual’s own happiness. We will discuss this potential worry more when it comes to my criticisms of Bloomfield’s account.

**The Argument from Epistemology**
Bloomfield has another related argument for the conclusion that immorality is harmful to self-respect, which he calls the argument from epistemology. As I interpret Bloomfield, the argument from ontology is the most important part of his account. We will see that the argument from epistemology derives a lot of its force from premises that are best supported by the argument from ontology. While the two arguments are related and attempt to support the same conclusion, the argument from epistemology has its own distinctive angle and is worth evaluating as its own piece of reasoning.

The sketch of the argument starts by first seeing that one’s knowledge of the world is based on making fair judgments about it and that the same applies to self-knowledge: one’s judgments about oneself will not yield self-knowledge if they are not accurate, and they are not accurate if they are not fair. This idea is then taken in conjunction with another: that self-respect requires self-knowledge. From here, the conclusion can be reached that people lack self-respect if they are not making fair judgments about who they are, since self-respect requires respecting the self and this requires self-knowledge. Since immorality involves people making unfair judgments about themselves, immorality keeps people from having self-respect. Once again, we see that one cannot both be immoral and maintain self-respect. Since both sides have agreed that self-respect is necessary for the Good Life, once again immorality is shown to keep one from living it.45

This argument shares with the previous one the assumption that self-respect is necessary for the Good Life, which Bloomfield thinks is agreed to by both parties to the debate. It also combines this with the idea that self-respect is damaged by immorality. It differs from the first argument in that this connection is not made by any ontological facts about what people are. Instead the connection is made through the epistemological notion of fair judging. We might paraphrase this argument in premise-conclusion format as follows:

1. Judgments about oneself that are unfair do not yield self-knowledge.

2. Self-respect requires self-knowledge.

45 Bloomfield, The Virtues of Happiness, 72-73.
3. Immorality involves people making unfair judgments about themselves.

4. Hence, immorality keeps people from having self-knowledge.

5. Hence, immorality keeps people from having self-respect.

6. Self-respect is necessary for happiness and the Good Life.

7. Therefore, immorality keeps people from being happy and living the Good Life.

We’ve seen that (6) is an assumption shared by both the moralist and the Fosco. (7) follows directly from (6) and (5), where (5) follows from (4) and (2). (4) follows directly from (1) and (3). So the new premises that need to be explained and defended here are (1), (2), and (3).

Premise (1), that judgments about oneself that are unfair do not yield self-knowledge, is entailed by some general considerations about epistemology, according to Bloomfield. The principle of judgment that like cases should be treated alike seems to be fundamental and unavoidable in all talk about judging or knowledge. While not sufficient for acquiring knowledge, it seems that this principle is necessary for it, since denying this principle undermines the entire practice of judging; if our putative ‘knowledge’ is not grounded in the way the world really is, then it cannot be genuine knowledge.

This requires what Bloomfield calls “a particular form of supervenience, an asymmetrical and weak form, obtaining between the ‘facts of the case’ and the judgments we make about them, such that differences in judgment must be based on a difference between the facts of the cases; otherwise, cases are treated similarly (judgment being a form of treatment).” 46 Bloomfield thinks this is similar to a Rawlsian notion of justice as “the

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46 Bloomfield, The Virtues of Happiness, 73.
elimination of arbitrary distinctions."  

If we allow arbitrary distinctions to infect our judgments then we have undermined the entire process and no longer have reason to take our judgments seriously. If this is the case then we cannot have any knowledge. “Making just or fair judgments of cases yields knowledge; making unjust or unfair judgments does not.”

Naturally, what applies to judgments and knowledge generally can also be applied to self-knowledge. If we do not eliminate arbitrary distinctions in judgments about ourselves, then we cannot have genuine knowledge of ourselves as the people that we are.

In particular, given the social relations which every human being has relied upon (we are all born of women, babies cannot survive without adult help, etc.), we must understand ourselves in part by how we are related to others. Thus, if we are to have knowledge about ourselves, we must judge fairly who we are in relation to others. A human being’s self-knowledge requires knowledge of other human beings.

Treating like cases alike applies to cases of self-knowledge just as much as to cases of knowledge about others. To have genuine self-knowledge we must fairly judge how we compare with others, noting similarities and differences objectively. “Bias in judgments, inflating the value of the self or discounting the value of others (or the contrary, in cases of self-abnegation), such that one fails to treat like cases alike as a result of the bias, will not bring about self-knowledge but rather a false and biased view of the self which constitutes self-deception and not self-knowledge.”

Premise (2), that self-respect requires self-knowledge, is based on the idea that people can be wrong about whether or not they have self-respect. A person “can lack self-respect as

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47 Ibid., 74.
48 Ibid.
49 Ibid., 75.
50 Ibid.
a result of not respecting who one truly is but rather respecting a false conception of oneself, which is itself the result of a lack of self-knowledge.”\textsuperscript{51} Bloomfield acknowledges that this may seem strange or unintuitive, but he explains how this would work with the de dicto / de re distinction applied to self-respect, which results in two types of self-respect: fraudulent self-respect and authentic self-respect.

One might think that an individual cannot erroneously think that she respected herself. So-called ‘reactive attitudes’, like resentment or respect, seem to be “subjectively constituted in such a way that we cannot be mistaken about them when we adopt them towards one person or another.”\textsuperscript{52} But Bloomfield thinks that if they are based on mistaken judgments they can be wrong. De dicto self-respect would be respect aimed at the person who fits the description ‘the individual that I actually am’. So this would be the actual self, since this fits the description whether or not we think it does. If we have accurate judgments about who we are, then all our judgments or feelings of respect will be aimed at this person. De re self-respect is the respect we actually have without regard to whether or not the object of that respect fits the description under which we think of it. So this would be respect aimed at who we think we are, or the person we (possibly mistakenly) think fits the description ‘the individual that I actually am’. If we have biased or inaccurate judgments about who we are, then our judgments or feelings of respect will be aimed at this person (who may not actually exist or have the properties we think this individual does).

In this latter case our de dicto and de re attitudes of self-respect will diverge and be directed at different people, which we will call ‘fraudulent self-respect’. “[I]f we are

\textsuperscript{51} Bloomfield, \textit{The Virtues of Happiness}, 75-76.

\textsuperscript{52} Ibid., 76.
deceived about ourselves and respect ourselves based on false and self-deceitful beliefs, then our self-respect is error-laden.”53 We think we are respecting ourselves, but really we have taken “an attitude of self-respect toward the people who we wish we were but are not.”54 When de dicto self-respect and de re self-respect have converged on the same person we will call this ‘authentic self-respect’. This is the kind of self-respect that we need to have in order to live lives that really are good, as opposed to lives that we are deceived into thinking are good but are actually not. This is the kind of self-respect that requires self-knowledge to attain, so we see that self-knowledge is necessary for the kind of self-respect that leads to the Good Life and happiness.

If the above is correct then it is possible for people to be wrong about the kind of self-respect that they have. Bloomfield presents another piece of evidence for this claim, which evidence is supposed to show that both parties to the debate should agree to this claim since they implicitly already act as if it were true. The idea is that both sides think that the other falsely believes they have self-respect.

[N]either the Foscos nor the Hartrights should balk at any of this up front, given that we have assumed that each thinks they know themselves while thinking the other is self-deceitful: the Foscos arrogantly think they know themselves while thinking the Hartrights fools or dupes, whether the latter see it or not, and the Hartrights will modestly think they know themselves while thinking the Foscos have foolishly bought into a set of supposedly self-aggrandizing values which in fact do not lead to happiness, whether they can see it or not.55

There is a lot here that I agree with, though I still don’t think it will work out quite the way Bloomfield thinks it will. While I agree with Bloomfield’s distinction between

53 Bloomfield, The Virtues of Happiness, 77.
54 Ibid.
55 Ibid., 78.
fraudulent and authentic self-respect, in the next chapter I will question whether this need be relevant to how good a life is in the way that Bloomfield claims. I also agree with the de re /
de dicto distinction and the idea that people can be wrong about whether they have self-
respect or not. But while it seems clear that some kind of self-knowledge is necessary for
self-respect, I will argue that Bloomfield ends up defending a peculiar notion of ‘self-
knowledge’ as a success term. It’s not as clear that this particular kind of self-knowledge really is necessary.

    Premise (3), that immorality involves people making unfair judgments about themselves, relies on ideas related to the argument from ontology. There it was claimed that all humans have some essential properties which they all share with each other. Since each individual has these shared properties, immoral actions which are disrespectful to them in other people are also disrespectful to those properties as they are instantiated by the individual. This means that these immoral actions are really self-disrespecting, whether the individual realizes it or not. These essential shared properties, combined with the principle of treating like cases alike, “entail that, insofar as each of us is the same as everyone else, we ought not to judge or treat ourselves according to a different standard than we judge or treat others.”56 To the extent that we do judge in this biased way, our actions will not be conducive

to a self-respect that is authentic and thus appropriate to ground a truly Good Life.

    If we each think our own lives are more than merely instrumentally valuable, then we ought not to treat others as if their lives are merely instrumentally valuable, since in this regard we are essentially identical. This provides us with a bottom-line standard of respectful self-regarding and other-regarding behavior, based on everyone being more than instrumentally valuable. If people demand the respect that is owed to a human being who is, as such, more than a mere tool or

56 Bloomfield, *The Virtues of Happiness*, 78.
instrument, and then go on to fail to treat others as being deserving of the same sort of respect, this shows them to be in denial about those aspects of themselves that they share with others.\textsuperscript{57}

If a person’s attitudes or actions demonstrate that he or she is incorrectly judging facts of the world, then these judgments cannot ground authentic knowledge. This is no less true when the object of those judgments is the individual’s own self and its relation to other people.

Perpetrating immorality is proof that like cases are not being treated alike by the perpetrator. Immorality induces self-deception by making it seem to immoral people that they are justified in their own immorality, justified in thinking of themselves as somehow better than those of whom they have taken unfair advantage. Insofar as immorality engenders self-deception, it prevents the self-knowledge that we have already seen is necessary for authentic self-respect, that is, respect founded upon fair and just self-assessments. And we agreed long ago that self-respect is necessary for the Good Life. Therefore, immorality is bad for you.\textsuperscript{58}

To quickly recap the argument from epistemology: immorality keeps people from having self-knowledge, since it is based on unfair judgments about oneself. Self-knowledge is necessary for the kind of self-respect that leads to the Good Life, which means that immorality keeps people from having self-respect. Both sides of the debate agree that people without self-respect cannot be living the Good Life, so we must conclude that immorality prevents people from being happy and living the Good Life.

\textsuperscript{57} Bloomfield, \textit{The Virtues of Happiness}, 78-79.

\textsuperscript{58} Ibid., 79.
CHAPTER 3

WHY BLOOMFIELD’S AMBITIOUS ARGUMENT FAILS

This chapter will present my arguments for why Bloomfield’s case fails to succeed as an ‘ambitious’ argument. An ambitious argument is one that succeeds even on the basis of premises that the Fosco would accept. So, in order for Bloomfield to provide strong support for his conclusion that living morally is the only way to live the Good Life, he must give a dialectically neutral non-question-begging argument which shows that the Fosco is wrong even by his own lights. Furthermore, Bloomfield acknowledges that it is not enough to show that being immoral is irrational; instead he must show that being immoral is self-undermining in that it prevents a person’s being happy. This is quite the task he has set himself, and I will argue that he does not succeed. Whether or not he may still have a good but more modest argument – one involving premises the Fosco likely will not accept but at great dialectical cost – will be discussed in Chapter 4; in this chapter I will only argue against his case being successful as an ambitious argument.

This chapter is organized around which aspect of Bloomfield’s argument that I will be criticizing. First I discuss some considerations about Bloomfield’s account of the Good Life in general. Second I look at the argument from ontology in detail. Third I criticize the argument from epistemology.
The Good Life

The first criticism that I have of Bloomfield’s argument relates to his notion of the Good Life. In brief, the idea is that he starts with a merely formal account of the Good Life and then tries to derive some substantial conclusions from this without begging any questions. But I think that if he really starts with a neutral setup this shouldn’t be possible. We will see this in particular with the idea that the life good in itself for the one who lives it relies only on features intrinsic to a life, while Bloomfield’s morally good life relies on features extrinsic to a life. For example, we could ‘rescue’ Bloomfield’s account if we included in our conception of what makes a life good some distinctly moral claims. We might claim, say, that a life which includes undetected (even by the individual) wrongdoing is necessarily thereby worse (for the individual). But then our argument would be question-begging, since this is one of the very things that we are trying to find out or establish.

Some general considerations about the Good Life will be helpful to discuss here. Bloomfield sets up the dialectic in such a way that the definitions of ‘morality’ and ‘Good Life’ do not beg any questions against the Fosco. Morality is the true all-things-considered answer to what we should do, or the action that recognizes what is truly valuable. So morality is the answer to the question “How ought I to live?”, which is the same as the Good Life. Bloomfield leaves it open at this point what the Good Life will turn out to be. All the terms and definitions are laid out in such a way that they merely frame the debate and capture the question; there would be no logical or conceptual incoherency in the Good Life turning out to be the life of selfish egoism. Naturally, Bloomfield does not think it will turn out this way,

based on the arguments from ontology and from epistemology. But this way of setting it up prevents us from having an argument merely over words and allows for different substantial views of the Good Life to all be considered. So the debate is well-framed in that respect; however, there are several different ways that the “How ought I to live?” question and the Good Life can be interpreted. We don’t want to assume right away that we must mean one or the other of these potential interpretations when our dialectical opponent may have a different one in mind.

Many contemporary philosophers distinguish between different types of good lives. For example, Susan Wolf distinguishes between two different and separable conceptions of a Good Life that we could use to evaluate lives: happiness and meaning.\textsuperscript{60} John Kekes notes that we could measure a life’s goodness on three different scales: “Good lives may be understood as lives of moral worth, or as lives of satisfaction, or as lives combining moral worth and satisfaction in some proportion.”\textsuperscript{61} Stephen Darwall makes a distinction between two aspects that might come apart: the interest of the individual and the worth of his or her life for others.\textsuperscript{62} L.W. Sumner distinguishes other forms of value from “what we may call the prudential value of a life, namely how well it is going for the individual whose life it is.”\textsuperscript{63}

Another contemporary philosopher, Fred Feldman, emphasizes the different scales of evaluation of lives in his book \textit{Pleasure and the Good Life}. This is the version of the


distinction that I will focus on for the purposes of illustrating how it could differ from Bloomfield’s. The Good Life could mean the morally good life, the life good for its consequences, the beautiful life, the life that best exemplifies human life, or the life good in itself for the one who lives it.\textsuperscript{64} Feldman also argues that the different kinds of good lives may diverge, since a life good on one scale of valuation may be low on another. He gives the example of Mother Teresa, who lived a life exemplary in terms of a morally good life. However, there is reason to think that her life was not good in itself for her as she lived it since she suffered from a lot of physical and emotional pain, even to the point of feeling “as if God had abandoned her, and that her life was meaningless.”\textsuperscript{65}

If this is correct, then we may be forced to choose between different types of good lives, and we cannot assume that the Fosco would choose Bloomfield’s sense of ‘Good Life’ rather than the life good in itself for the one who lives it. And if we have really set up the debate to not beg any questions, we cannot privilege one way of understanding the question over another. We need a further neutral standpoint from which to adjudicate these conflicting claims to the Good Life. For the Fosco, the only standpoint that needs to count is that of his own life going well for himself as he lives it. So Bloomfield has to show that, even if we start with a different substantial view of the Good Life, we will be forced to switch to his conception. And it must be such that not doing so would be self-undermining, since Bloomfield aims to show that immorality is not just irrational but self-defeating.\textsuperscript{66}

\textsuperscript{65} Ibid., 10.
\textsuperscript{66} Bloomfield, \textit{The Virtues of Happiness}, 4.
Bloomfield wants his argument to proceed non-question-beggingly from a neutral setup and he wants to keep the Fosco in the game. The assumptions in place so far are only structural and not normative or substantial in any way. It’s also clear that the theory should be one that is about the life good for the individual. This means that the Fosco is allowed to start with a conception of the Good Life as the one good in itself for the one who lives it. Indeed, this must be the relevant notion since Bloomfield is giving an account of what it is for the individual to live well. This means that the only factors that Bloomfield can appeal to in defense of his account of the Good Life will have to do with the intrinsic features of that life for the individual. Extrinsic features may be relevant in terms of evaluating a life’s goodness on some other scale, but they will be irrelevant for its goodness in itself for the individual.

The concept of ‘intrinsic’ is a very tricky one to try to pin down. It may well have many different meanings, so I will give a merely stipulative definition. For the purposes of this paper, ‘intrinsic’ means something that is concerned only with the thing or the parts of that thing. So features intrinsic to a life will include things like how the individual developed his or her potentialities and powers, how much pleasure and pain were experienced by the individual, or how the components of that life relate to one another. Features that will not be intrinsic to a life will be things like how it measured up to an external or ideal standard, how it related to a separate life, or the consequences it had for others. These will be ‘extrinsic’, which simply means not intrinsic. Individuals may of course decide to care about extrinsic features, which will make them relevant to how that life fared intrinsically. This may even include caring about them when they will never have any effect on you (or even anybody) or caring about things that will only happen after you are dead. But individuals are not obliged
to care about them if we remember that we are only focusing on the prudential value of each individual’s life.

So for some people it may be the case that factors extrinsic to their lives count very much for how well they see their lives going. They may even decide that how they view the goodness of their own lives does depend on extrinsic factors, even if they never come to know of them. For example, some people would think their life is less good the further it gets from the ideal of human flourishing. If this is what is meant by ‘flourishing’, then this would be an extrinsic metric for those that don’t care about it, and it need not count in considerations of how good the life is in itself for the one that lives that. If ‘flourishing’ is fully internal to a life then whether or not it aligns with an external standard or ideal will be irrelevant to someone who chooses not to care about it. Or people may think their life is worse to the extent that it is further away from the ideal of a perfectly moral life. They may prefer a life less intrinsically good for the individual if it does better on some other scale. For these people a lot more factors are going to have to be factored in to the evaluation of lives. However, some people may not care at all about any factor extrinsic to their life. If the Fosco is one of these, and it’s not self-undermining to not care, then these kinds of considerations haven’t given him a reason to change his mind.

The only substantial point of agreement that the Fosco seems committed to is the idea of ‘flourishing’. As noted in the previous chapter, the Fosco is aware of the distinction between flourishing and merely appearing to flourish. So far, though, the notion of ‘flourishing’ can only mean something like ‘the individual living the best life possible for him or her’. It does not mean something like ‘living up to the ideal standard of humanity’. Such things like developing human excellences may well have what we may call (following
Sumner\textsuperscript{67} perfectionist value, but this is a different scale of value than how well one’s life is going for the individual living it. For that latter claim to follow, it must be that not doing so is self-undermining to the individual’s own happiness. This claim is a very substantial claim and it is one that cannot be derived from merely the definition of ‘flourishing’ without begging the question.

This claim would require that someone who thought that only the intrinsic features of a life counted for its goodness is nevertheless forced to hold that a life which measures up to an independent objective standard need always be preferred over a life which does not but has all the goodness from its own perspective that it could want. The argument would have to not beg any questions or appeal to any substantial but external premises. It seems that Bloomfield’s very ambitious project cannot succeed in this way.

Now Bloomfield may deny that, for him at least, his sense of the Good Life could come apart from the life good in itself for the one who lives it. Morality is the all-things-considered answer to the question of “How ought I to live?”, where all the relevant factors are taken into account. This includes things like not acting in self-disrespecting ways, even if doing so were to produce the best consequences. Since his account of morality includes self-regarding and other-regarding considerations, one might think that it would prevent telling an individual to destroy her own life for the sake of another (like Mother Teresa arguably did in the sense of a life good in itself for the one who lives it).

However, I do not think this is correct: Bloomfield’s Good Life and the life good in itself for the one who lives it can sometimes diverge and force a person to choose one or the

\textsuperscript{67} Sumner, \textit{Welfare, Happiness, and Ethics}, 42.
other. This point can be appreciated by considering an example modified from one given by Harry Frankfurt: “it might be possible for someone to bring about an enormous benefit to mankind merely by pressing a button.” Frankfurt’s point here is that the meaningfulness of a life is separable from the value of the final ends adopted, but I think this example could also show that promoting what is of value and an individual’s quality of life can come apart. Suppose that every time this person pushes the button a million humans are enabled to live a Good Life when they would not have been able to otherwise. Clearly the best way to promote what is of value in the world all-things-considered is for that person to spend her whole life pressing that button. Just as clearly, if this was the person’s whole life it would not be a life that is happy or flourishing for the individual in any meaningful way.

We can further suppose that this person could have lived a life very good in itself for the one who lives it if she had never stumbled upon this button. Upon finding the button, she realizes that the lives of these other people that she could help are similar to her own. Collectively they far outweigh the value of her own life. So, all-things-considered, she ought to devote her life to pressing that button. However, she also has the option of ignoring the button and being assured that her having made this decision will never be remembered by her or affect her psychologically in any way. If her highest priority was really her own individual life going as well as possible for her, then she ought to take this option.

We might still want to say that the moral choice would be to devote herself to the button, but in this case we are not just evaluating her life on the basis of a life good in itself for the one who lives it. We’ve said that she goes from having a chance at living a life good

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to her living a life that is not good for her, so she really is giving something up. She is diminishing the value in her own life (the intrinsic value in a life) in order to promote value in something that is not her life (a factor extrinsic to a life). So she is forced to choose between a life good in itself for the one who lives it and a life that is good on some other scale of evaluation. Whatever standards we want to appeal to for this decision, it does not seem self-undermining to her own life going well to ignore the button.

One might object to this example by asking if the person in this unfortunate situation could have been made more happy by not helping others flourish. In reply, if by ‘happy’ we mean what Bloomfield seems to mean by the moral life (truly judging what is valuable and acting accordingly all-things-considered), then no. But then it becomes clear that we are not talking about anything like the individual’s well-being or flourishing. If her being tortured on the rack promotes the ends of her values, it still wouldn’t promote her happiness, unless we radically redefined ‘happiness’. If a theory tells us that a life that is filled with suffering and no enjoyment or feelings of pleasure is nonetheless ‘happy’ this is reason to question that theory, as Aristotle noted in the first book (especially at 1096a2) of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Also, this reply would revive the robust sufficiency view of the Stoics, where virtue is always sufficient for happiness full stop. But Bloomfield disavows this view and says that it is not even desirable as an account of the Good Life for human beings, so it can’t be appealed to here.

If this kind of sacrifice is possible, then it is not always the case that Bloomfield’s Good Life will correspond with the life good in itself for the one who lives it. So it seems

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that sometimes a person could have to choose between her individual flourishing and the flourishing of others. And it also seems like this was already implicit in some other comments that Bloomfield has made. He notes that a eudaimonist can be “capable of taking my happiness to be the final, supreme end of my life while simultaneously finding things in the world which I think are more valuable than my happiness.” So right away there is the possibility of conflict, and redefining how we understand the terms to try to avoid the conflict does not help. Certainly, we could redefine things this way. But if so, then we’ve given up the claim that we are starting from a life good in itself for the one who lives it. Hence we’ve failed to take the egoist across the bridge by showing that he must live morally even on his own terms. And if this is true, then the egoist who starts with the Good Life as the one good in itself for the one who lives it will not be forced to always choose Bloomfield’s sense of ‘Good Life’.

In the button scenario the person has sacrificed her happiness for that of others, which shows that it is at least possible for an individual’s flourishing to conflict with that of others. One might think that if an action best promotes what you value then it just can’t be self-disrespecting, but this re-labeling doesn’t help resolve the conflict. It may be the way to best promote what you value, but it’s still not your flourishing that you are promoting. To deny this is to say that your personal well-being just can’t conflict with that of other goods that you value, which seems just false and in conflict with what Bloomfield says about one’s happiness not being the most important thing in the world.

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If it’s true that the life good in itself for the individual can differ from Bloomfield’s morally good life, then a life good on one scale of evaluation may not be good on other scales of evaluation, so a person might be forced to choose. Feldman notes that we should acknowledge that a life that is good for the world may not be good for you, or vice versa.72 It seems that Bloomfield is at least implicitly committed to this as well, since he thinks that the Good Life for an individual should not seek to promote the best consequences, even when this concerns what is really of value, as the example of the dutiful daughter is supposed to show.73 But if this is so, there is even more reason to think that a person’s individual happiness can conflict with the moral thing to do or what is best for others. And if the Fosco takes the life good in itself for the one who lives it as his starting view of the Good Life, in order to be convinced by Bloomfield’s arguments it would have to be the case that not switching his view is self-undermining to his own happiness in some way.

Looking at an example that Bloomfield gives will help to further bring out the difference between his take on the Good Life and that of one more in line with a life good in itself for the one who lives it. Bloomfield thinks that paradigm cases of immorality may seem to contribute to a person’s living a Good Life when the agent benefits from it, but that it never does benefit that person in the end. “Its [immorality’s] rewards are like the college diploma of a student who was a career cheater. In one sense it is a ‘real’ diploma, since it was officially issued by the college, but in another, more important sense it is a fake: the

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acquisition of learning and knowledge it is supposed to represent was not, in fact, obtained.”

It seems to me that Bloomfield may here be conflating different types of good lives. This can be seen by evaluating the analogy more closely. A diploma is supposed to represent some academic achievement, but a life need not be supposed to ‘represent’ anything outside of itself. When we ask if a person lived a Good Life, we may mean a life that was good in itself for the one living it. (And, presumably, Bloomfield must at least start with something similar in order to keep the Fosco in the game, since he is trying to show the Fosco that he has reasons even on his own view of the Good Life to be moral in Bloomfield’s sense.) If this is our criterion, then all that matters is the intrinsic features of the life as lived from the perspective of the person; whether or not a life ‘represented’ anything is an extrinsic factor that is irrelevant to whether or not that life was good in this sense. If we meant to ask whether the life was good from the perspective of having the best consequences, or helping others, or being a beautiful life, then what (if anything) it does represent would be a relevant consideration. If we were evaluating a life for its goodness in terms of beauty, we might consider aesthetic factors like whether a “person’s life might make a fine subject for a moving and beautiful biography, or even for a novel or a play.” If we were interested in a life’s goodness on this scale then the analogy might work, but it seems like it doesn’t work in the case of a Good Life for the person living it.

If we evaluate the life of the cheater strictly based on its intrinsic features, the only thing that counts is the flourishing of the individual in the sense of developing the

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74 Bloomfield, The Virtues of Happiness, 58.
75 Feldman, Pleasure and the Good Life, 9.
potentialities and powers of the actual individual as he or she really is. When we talk about what makes a life good in itself for the ones who lives it, the only things that count should be internal to the life of an agent. This is what makes a life; there is no further fact or representation that could be evaluated to affect how good of a life it was on this scale. How that life compared to the ideal of human flourishing, or how much that life helped other people live better lives, is not relevant. (Unless that person chose to care intrinsically about those things, but she need not do so.)

It may be that from the agent’s own perspective obtaining the diploma through cheating, though maybe not the best option of all possibilities, may have been the best option that was actually available. Sure, maybe the ideal human flourisher wouldn’t have had to cheat. But maybe given the actual mental and physical set up of the individual involved, this option was not available. Bloomfield claims that a “better sort of life is one in which goals are attained without cheating the way through.”76 He may be correct here, but not in a way that is relevant to the issue at hand. If the cheater had to choose between a life in which he earned a degree fairly and one in which he ‘earned’ one through cheating, the first option may well be the more choice-worthy, even in terms of intrinsic features. However, the real question is whether a life in which he tries to honestly earn a degree but fails is nevertheless better than a life in which he gets the benefits from having a degree that he obtained through cheating. And for Bloomfield’s point to hold it would have to always be better, no matter the relative weights of the costs and benefits in all possible scenarios. One would have to show that being moral in the worst of situations is nonetheless always the best option.

76 Bloomfield, The Virtues of Happiness, 59.
Granted, the button scenario and the college diploma are extreme examples. But Bloomfield is clear from the beginning that he is arguing that being moral (in his sense) is always the best option in every possible situation. Hence the mere possibility of counterexamples is enough to show that Bloomfield’s strong claim that the moral choice is always the best choice for the individual is not true, or at least not supported ambitiously. If he were arguing for the weaker claim that for almost all humans almost all the time, living the moral life is the right option for having the best chance of flourishing and living the Good Life, that would be a different argument (and one I am not arguing against here). If this were the argument, then things like psychological generalizations about human beings would be relevant. However, if the individual is unlike the statistical norm then these facts would be extrinsic factors that may not apply to the actual individual. And, again, only facts about the individual matter in terms of the life good in itself for the one who lives it.

One way of understanding ‘eudaimonism’ is to focus on claims like these about humans-in-general or humans-most-of-the-time. But if this is what Bloomfield means then I think it leads to problems with his argument. Bloomfield wants to address human beings who are not the statistical norm, like the Fosco. So he can’t redefine ‘human’ such that the Fosco doesn’t fall into that category. This kind of flourishing is not what the Fosco has agreed to. Instead it is the development of the actual person given the way he actually is or has the real potential to become. This must be included in ‘human’, or else Bloomfield is not giving a reason to the Fosco. How an individual’s life matches up to some ideal standard is an

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extrinsic factor that may not be relevant, given the actual properties and potentialities of the individual involved.

There seems to be little reason to think that every actual individual human being would live a life better for himself by more closely approximating the ideal human. Certainly the Fosco has not agreed to this claim. And it does seem that there need not be any incoherence in “I am human, but the life best for me does not necessarily correspond to the ideal human life (or the correct theory of the best life for humans).” If this is right then the argument has not convinced the Fosco on his own grounds on pain of being self-undermining to his own well-being.

Now I will give my own example meant to explain what I mean and to further bring home the different approaches one might take to a Good Life. Once I was reading through the Youtube comments on a music video (a colossal waste of time I know), and I came across this startling line: “If you only listen to music that you like, then you are an egoist, not a fan.” This was meant as a rebuke, as the context made it clear that ‘egoist’ was intended as a pejorative term. This surprised me, as I had never before considered that I should do something else with my personal music preferences other than listen to music that fits my own idiosyncratic taste. There may well be something to supporting your favorite band through thick and thin, or to promoting good music, but this should not be confused with the experience of enjoying listening to music. The analogy with lives is that the Fosco may well start out with the view that he ought only to make his own life go as well as possible for himself.

We can imagine a music listener not capable of appreciating classical music as opposed to horrible pop hits. This person might even agree with the snobby professor of
music that classical music is objectively better and more worthy of being listened to and appreciated. But since she doesn’t have the capacity to appreciate it, why should she stop listening to pop garbage and switch to classical? It doesn’t seem to be in her best interest to do so, since she gets more enjoyment out of pop. Even if she realizes that some objective end of people valuing good music would be better achieved if she listened to classical, this fact does not give *her* a reason to switch; none of these types of facts about classical being better, even if true, give her any kind of reason from her own perspective to switch. In other words, showing that, for example, Mozart is better than Lady Gaga isn’t sufficient for getting someone to admit that she has a reason to start listening to Mozart over Lady Gaga from her own perspective if all she cares about is listening to music that she enjoys.

If the music listener thought that the point of her music listening experience was *to exemplify the best kind of music listening*, or *to display the most excellent kind of music*, or *to get others to appreciate truly good music*, then she might have reason to agree with the music snob that she should change her music-listening habits. But these are factors extrinsic to her own music-listening experience. So if she takes the point of her music-listening to be *her enjoying music*, then what the music snob says and what the ideal music-listener would do, even if they are right, do not constitute a reason for her to change what she listens to. Hence, from the point of view of the Lady Gaga fan, these other considerations are quite beside the point. We might say they are reasons of the wrong kind. In our theory of the life that is good for the individual, we are asking how to make the individual’s life intrinsically better, not how to change the individual as he or she is to more closely fit the mold of some external standard (even if that standard is better in some objective sense).
We might hope that the different ways of looking at the point of music listening would converge and give the same answer, but if they don’t then we can’t assume that one particular way of looking at it is the one that should trump the others. The music listener is not forced to view her listening to music as representative of anything else: it’s just her *enjoying music* primarily, and anything else it happens to be is of secondary importance (and not enough importance to trump considerations regarding what is primarily important). This is another way of saying that we must evaluate how good an experience is for the person experiencing it in terms of its intrinsic features, while its extrinsic features will be an extra and different type of consideration. On this assumption, there is nothing to bridge the gap to force someone who chooses music based on getting the most enjoyment out of it to switch to choosing music that best meets some objective standard of good music.

The idea of the analogy is that something similar is going on with the Fosco. He may see that all-things-considered from the perspective of everyone (or the Universe, or the ideal human paradigm, or whatever) it’s better that he always make the right choice all-things-considered. But if he is not set up to get the most value intrinsic to his own life out of this and it wouldn’t contribute to his individual well-being, how does this constitute a reason for him to be moral? It is not a reason of the right kind. On his assumptions he should continue to live like he does, and Bloomfield has not given a non-question-begging argument to make him change his mind.

We can imagine the music professor or strident Youtube band fan making an argument like this: “You think your music is good. So even you admit that you want to listen to good music. But Mozart is better (more good) than Lady Gaga. Therefore, you should admit on your own grounds that you ought to listen to Mozart.” We would not (and I think
should not) be convinced by this argument. Pretty clearly there is an equivocation on the word ‘good’. I think a similar kind of bait and switch subtly infects Bloomfield’s account.

We can imagine an argument for morality going like this: “You think your life is good. So even you admit that you want to live a good life. The life of the moral person is better (more good) than that of the immoral person. Therefore, you should admit on your own grounds that you ought to live morally.” The problem is that ‘good’ switches from meaning ‘good for yourself’ to something more like ‘morally good’ or ‘objectively good’. This shouldn’t really be surprising, since any conclusion about how to live is a much more substantial claim than can be established by any mere setting up of neutral terms; arguments like this are not won by definition. Since the first argument is faulty and the second one has the same logical form, we should not be convinced by the second argument either.

What would have to be shown is that one just couldn’t get the same intrinsic goodness (for the individual) if one listened to pop garbage rather than Mozart. It would also have to be shown that being deceived into thinking that you are listening to objectively good music (and never feeling any effects of that deception) never could be as good (for you) in any circumstances as actually listening to objectively good music even if you are not set up to get any enjoyment out of it. Bloomfield would respond to my analogy with positive arguments for why morality and/or virtue is the only basis for authentic happiness. He has to show that one just couldn’t get the same quality of life (in terms of good in itself for the one who lives it) by living immorally. If the arguments from ontology and epistemology are right, then an immoral person really couldn’t get the benefits of living morally, since immorality always damages one’s own happiness. But I will argue below that these arguments do not work as Bloomfield thinks they do. If that is correct, then these concerns I’ve been raising
here will prove telling, and Bloomfield will not have succeeded in showing that the person who views her life like the music listener views music is always nevertheless undermining her own Good Life.

**Criticisms of the Argument from Ontology**

The argument from ontology holds that immorality is harmful to the happiness of its perpetrator. Immorality exhibits a disrespect to the humanity of its victims, when humanity is essential to the identity of the perpetrator, which means that the perpetrator disrespects his own essential properties. Since self-respect is necessary for happiness, immorality prevents the perpetrator from attaining it. My first point of criticism is that the Fosco, who is allowed to keep many of his assumptions, need not necessarily agree that being human is a property essential to his identity. If the Fosco can succeed at considering his humanity as biological kind to be an extrinsic factor to how well his life goes without being self-undermining, then it would seem that the argument from ontology fails as an ambitious argument.

The argument from ontology depends on the claim that the Fosco must see his humanity as being an essential property. In this way, by disrespecting other humans the Fosco has self-disrespect since he disrespects humanity which is essential to himself. By ‘essential property’ Bloomfield means “one without which an item would cease to exist.”

So the Fosco would have to see his personal identity as being dependent on his humanity such that if he were no longer human he would no longer be the person that he is. But this may not be the case since the Fosco is free to hold that something else is essential to his

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78 Bloomfield, *The Virtues of Happiness*, 63.
personal identity. Perhaps it is his consciousness, or his character traits, or his seeing that only his own good is all that matters that he takes to be essential to his identity. Even if the best theory of personal identity entails that we are essentially human, it seems very doubtful that it would do so in a way that makes not caring about this fact necessarily self-undermining for any and every individual.

A Fosco may be human, but he may not want to be limited to a (merely) human life. As Bloomfield notes, Foscos “tend to see themselves as better than the common run of folk, who to them are little more than cattle, to be used and manipulated with impunity. They have an air of superiority, and tend to be arrogant and condescending in their dealings with others.”\(^79\) Hence, on this view being human may not be worth much, especially not compared to being similar to the self-aggrandizing Fosco.

We need not think the Fosco is necessarily being childish or philosophically unsophisticated here. For example, Nietzsche (at least at times) seemed to support the idea that humanity is something that needed to be transcended. In *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, “[t]he human is a rope, fastened between beast and Overhuman”, not a goal but a bridge that must be overcome.\(^80\) The Fosco could hold the idea that humanity is at a lower moral stage than what we will become after we continue to grow and develop morally. (Remember that ‘moral’ is left open at the beginning of the dialectic, and means only whatever happens to be the correct answer to the question of how one should live, which is still open to debate.) So humanity would not be the ground of morality, reasons, or respect on this account.


A similar concern relates to another of Bloomfield’s comments: “The Foscos would have to acknowledge this: the human ability to make of our lives what we can is what gives us more than instrumental value.” Well, a Fosco may think that his ability to care intrinsically about only his own good is what gives his life more than instrumental value. Nothing forces him to agree with Bloomfield here. Since the Fosco may not agree with Bloomfield that shared humanity exerts any kind of normative pressure, the fact that there are two humans each trying to make something of their lives may not mean much. The Fosco may care about his own life going well but not particularly care much whether some other human’s life goes well.

Or, perhaps the Fosco does agree that the ability to make of our lives what we will is what makes people have more than instrumental value. However, on his view, it is the Fosco himself that really does make the most out of his life, and the Hartright just doesn’t do it as well as he could. The Fosco might think that only caring about your own narrow self-interest and doing everything you can to further it is the best way to ‘make of our life what we can’. If this is right then the Fosco is doing very well and the Hartright is doing very poorly at this most important thing. Furthermore, it may be that (some) humans have this ability, but if it is their ability to make of their life what they will that grounds their value, then it is not necessarily their humanity. And since the Fosco thinks that he does this better or exemplifies it more fully, there need be no mistake in the Fosco according himself more respect and consideration than he does the Hartright.

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81 Bloomfield, *The Virtues of Happiness*, 87.
Bloomfield thinks that such an account could not be tenable because it requires that ‘wisdom’, or the truth about how one ought to live, be self-undermining when this should not be possible. If it were the received view of how to live, it would be harder for everyone to achieve what they wanted, since “we would immediately be back in a Hobbesian war of ‘all upon all’, trusting no one and figuring everything’s value through a cost/benefit analysis. … Could wisdom really be such that everyone is worse off if they live according to its dictates?"^82

I have two points in reply. First, of course, if the world were to become set up as Bloomfield portrays it, the world would not remain so simplified. Wisdom would counsel those who could not survive alone to follow a social morality much as Hobbes was writing about, but only follow its demands when it is in your own long-term considered self-interest. This is not contrary to the Fosco’s take on wisdom, since of course the truth about how one ought to live may very well be different for individuals that are different. Wisdom for you would not recommend acting in this way if it was a fact that you would not do well if you followed this course of action. That would be a caricature of wisdom.

Second, even if we would stick with the simplified scenario that Bloomfield portrays, it’s not so clear that this would work out badly ‘for everyone’. For a person who could survive, wisdom would counsel that individual to live this kind of life. And this is just what the Fosco will typically claim: that he would thrive in these kinds of situations. So there need be no self-undermining of wisdom going on here. We do not want to assume that how a particular individual would be advised by wisdom to live his or her life will correspond to

^82 Bloomfield, *The Virtues of Happiness*, 87.
what would be best for every person considered individually. This would be a question-begging way of assuming that wisdom in the sense of what makes an individual’s life best for him or her needs to always correspond with what is best overall for everyone. But these are of course two very different issues.

These considerations also show the error in another comment that Bloomfield makes: “our shared human nature makes us all into a single class of ‘moral agent’ … and this alone has implications for how we ought to treat each other.” The Fosco could deny the first part of this quote, if the above paragraph is correct and it is not necessarily their humanity that makes people into moral agents. Moral agents need not necessarily be limited to human beings. So we are moral agents, but we only happen to be human as well. If it is really being a moral agent that grounds anything, then being human is just something extra that we could take or leave; the Fosco need not take the fact that humans form a class or natural grouping to make any special claims on him.

The Fosco could also challenge the second part of this quote. In order to not beg any questions, the ‘moral’ in ‘moral agent’ cannot just mean the same thing as Bloomfield’s definition of morality, so it cannot be this ‘alone’ which has normative implications. This is implicit in what Bloomfield writes: “the only claim at this point is that our status as human beings has implications for morality and what counts as the Good Life for creatures such as us; this is all metaphysics and does not entail anything normative.” So in order for this point to ground any substantial normative point, it must be combined with some other facts, like the fact that one ought all-things-considered to treat other moral agents (but the Fosco

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83 Bloomfield, *The Virtues of Happiness*, 68.
84 Ibid.
may deny that there are other ‘moral agents’) with advanced recognition respect (but the Fosco may deny that they are deserving of this).

The Fosco may agree that ‘moral agents’ deserve advanced recognition respect, but may disagree over the extension of that term, preferring to reserve it for some other factor. Maybe the Fosco thinks he is the only moral agent. Or maybe other Foscos would also be moral agents, but would not see conventionally immoral acts as really being bad. If the above is correct, then being human may entail some recognition respect, but this might be quite small, since the Fosco may not think that being human amounts to much. There is no prior reason to think that being human must be the ground for respect and the Fosco isn’t committed to thinking that this must be so. Hence the amount of respect owed to a thing in this category might be miniscule compared to the respect owed something of another category, like being able to do whatever it takes to further one’s own interest. So if the Fosco defines ‘moral agent’ loosely to include all humans, then it is not clear that this means they are necessarily deserving of advanced recognition respect, since it may be some other category or factor that grounds this.

I also think Bloomfield is wrong in his claim that this way of looking at recognition respect leads to a dilemma with both outcomes showing the Fosco’s self-respect to be fraudulent. The first horn of the dilemma is that “[i]f the Foscos accept the existence of recognition respect, then they would have to acknowledge that they do not act toward others in accordance with it, and this would imply that if they grant recognition respect to themselves (recognition self-respect), they are failing to treat like cases alike.”85 But if the

above is correct, then the Fosco may be using a different ground of respect than humanity, so
the cases would not be alike in the relevant respect.

The second horn of the dilemma is that “if they deny the existence of recognition
respect, then they have to deny that people are not merely instruments, which implies that
they deny part of what makes them be who they are as individuals and makes them be more
than mere instruments.”86 But, again, showing that the Fosco is committed to denying that
other people are more than mere instruments does not mean that he must regard himself as a
mere instrument if the basis for that difference is not taken to be their humanity but some
other factor.

Bloomfield claims that the “harm of being immoral is that it keeps one from seeing
the value of human life, and if one is human then one is kept from seeing the value of one’s
own life.”87 But if the Fosco does not take any special value to derive from the fact of his
mere humanity then this claim need not be true. Compare Bloomfield’s statement to one in
which something keeps one from seeing the value of X life, and if one is X then one is kept
from seeing the value of one’s own life. If the individual does not take X to be important to
the quality of his or her life, then not valuing that kind of life does not mean that one doesn’t
value one’s own life. This can be seen if X is something trivial or otherwise unimportant to
the quality of one’s life, like having mass, being composed of carbon atoms that are a certain
type of isotope, or having brown hair instead of black. The Fosco may take the value in his
life to derive from things other than his humanity, like his ability to trick other people into
getting what he wants from them. So if humanity is not essential to the identity of the Fosco,

86 Bloomfield, *The Virtues of Happiness*, 63.
87 Ibid., 72.
then not seeing the value of distinctly human life need not mean that one is prevented from seeing the value of one’s own life.

**Criticisms of the Argument from Epistemology**

The argument from epistemology relies in some ways on ideas found in the argument from ontology. Or perhaps it’s best to say that both rely on an assumption about how important the Fosco must take his humanity to be (an assumption I criticize).\(^8^8\) So if the first argument is sound, then this argument will be set up on a good foundation. Likewise, this means that if objections to the argument from ontology are successful, then they may also undermine the argument from epistemology. For example, the claim that immorality involves people making unfair judgments about themselves relies on the idea that we are essentially human and that the fact that we share this with other people entails that we must treat them with respect if we treat ourselves with self-respect. However, we saw above that the Fosco may be working with a different ground for his self-respect. If this is correct, then obviously the argument from epistemology cannot use this claim.

This also relates to Bloomfield’s claim that “if we are to have knowledge about ourselves, we must judge fairly who we are in relation to others. A human being’s self-knowledge requires knowledge of other human beings.”\(^8^9\) If the Fosco takes his humanity to be a non-essential or even trivial fact about himself, then he will think that no important

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\(^8^9\) Bloomfield, *The Virtues of Happiness*, 75.
knowledge will be lost. Indeed, if he is of a Nietzschean persuasion he will think this
knowledge is potentially harmful and must be overcome.

Some doubts might also be raised about the kind of knowledge that Bloomfield is
talking about here. He ends up defending a very particular notion of ‘knowledge’ as a success
term. He claims that you must have reliable belief-forming practices and judgments in order
to have the self-knowledge that is necessary for happiness. But we can easily imagine the
Fosco happening to have all the true beliefs about himself and his self-respect purely through
chance. Or maybe a scientist modifies his brain or there is some other process unconnected
with the normal belief-forming practices responsible for his having true beliefs. So even if
you don’t have ‘knowledge’ in Bloomfield’s strict sense, it may be that other kinds of
‘knowledge’ would be enough to be a necessary constituent of the Good Life. In other words,
why care about ‘knowledge’ as a success term if you can otherwise have all the right beliefs
and the attendant benefits with regard to self-respect and happiness? This again relates to the
idea that only the intrinsic features of a life need count for how good that life is in itself for
the one who lives it.

A reply might be attempted along the lines of developing a more robust sense of ‘self-
knowledge’. For example, one might think that knowledge is not just acquiring a lot of true
facts, but also that “these facts have to be integrated, absorbed, and processed.”90 Something
like this might end up being the right account of a robust sense of ‘knowledge’, but if so it’s
not clear how this kind of knowledge would really be strictly necessary for happiness. Self-
knowledge might really be more like a process or activity than a list of true beliefs. But, if

you are trying to convince the skeptic, you want to avoid taking on as many substantial assumptions as you can. So to follow through with this reply you would have to do a lot more work establishing a lot of unrelated claims, which would decrease the chances of your convincing the skeptic, since any further defense offered must be self-undermining to reject in order to keep the skeptic in the game and in line with Bloomfield’s strong claims. Also, similarly to the last paragraph, if it’s possible to have the benefits of this process without the cost of going through the process, then why not just do that? If it is possible, then why wouldn’t it be the most advantageous thing for you to do, the thing that allows your life to go as well as it can?

Bloomfield seems to think that all self-deception works against one’s self-knowledge and self-respect. If we accept his technical account of robust self-knowledge this may be true. But the Fosco is not obliged to accept this account if it’s not self-defeating. In that case it is not at all clear that all manner of self-deception (detected or undetected) is necessarily damaging to one’s own well-being. I’ll borrow two quick examples that seem to support this idea. We can imagine someone who is not a good public speaker becoming a better one (though still not a great one) by getting herself to believe that she is a great public speaker.91 Or there could be a witness to a crime threatened with death by the some criminals if she doesn’t convince the jury that the perpetrator is innocent. However, she is a terrible liar and knows that the only way to be believable is to deceive herself into thinking he didn’t do it.92 These appear to be counterexamples to the claim that any kind of self-deception works

against the well-being of the individual. So even if self-deception is not enough for Bloomfield’s robust sense of self-knowledge, it need not automatically mean that any self-respect based on it is ‘fraudulent’ (in the pejorative sense that it must always counts against one’s own well-being).

It’s worth pointing out again that even though these may be extreme examples not likely to occur in real life, they are still objections to Bloomfield’s account. He is trying to give an argument for why being moral is always the best in every situation. It is not enough that the argument would work for most people in most situations, or that it is well supported by a lot of generalizations. Bloomfield is trying to non-question-beggingly convince the Fosco, who would likely see these generalizations as being irrelevant to the individual that he actually is.

Reactions to this line of thinking may well vary a lot from individual to individual. For some people it is likely true that they would not value a life without robust self-knowledge as much as a similar one with less. But we could just as easily imagine lots of people who would not care in the slightest. If we’ve eliminated a lot of other factors that might matter, like knowing that you have this lack, or this lack affecting you in any noticeable way, or its affecting others, then it’s not clear how this must nevertheless be bad for someone who doesn’t care about it at all. Also, a lot of the other factors one might point to in attempting to justify this claim would only be weighty for people who already happen to be of this persuasion. The goal of Bloomfield’s arguments is to convince the skeptic, and a lot of these kinds of considerations would be compelling or have motivational force only for someone who already pretty much agrees with Bloomfield’s position.
Bloomfield claims that “if we have deceived ourselves about who we are, then we are merely fraudulently respecting who we wish we were and not who we actually are. So, self-knowledge is a necessary condition for having authentic self-respect.”\(^{93}\) It would be a problem for this account if the Fosco is not forced on his own assumptions to admit that ‘fraudulent’ self-respect is any less conducive to his own self-interest (if he himself never comes to know that it is fraudulent). Why exactly does fraudulent self-respect have to be less good than authentic (if even the person doesn’t know and he gets the same benefit from it)? Would the Fosco admit that this difference affects how well his life goes? If not then he won’t care. Bloomfield claims that self-knowledge is necessary for happiness, but it seems like apparent self-knowledge of how well your life is going may be enough for (qualitatively identical) merely apparent self-respect.

We might think that the Fosco has already agreed that he needs authentic self-respect rather than merely apparent self-respect. It is true that the Fosco does seem to care about actually being happy versus merely feeling that he is happy, as Bloomfield correctly notes. However, I think that Bloomfield’s argument actually presupposes a more substantial agreement than this. He seems to think that considerations of actually being happy must always swamp merely subjectively feeling to be happy. But I don’t see why that has to be true, or that the Fosco has committed himself to this point. Yes, actually being happy is better than merely feeling happy, all else being equal. But all else is rarely, if ever, actually equal. I think that if we consider a detailed hypothetical situation we can see some problems with Bloomfield’s account.

\(^{93}\) Bloomfield, *The Virtues of Happiness*, 78.
We can imagine a tragic situation in which being happy in the sense of actually flourishing is only possible to a very small degree. Furthermore, doing so must come at the cost of living a life that is horrendous in terms of subjective feelings of happiness and unhappiness. If we have to choose between this and a life that is subjectively extremely ‘happy’ but does not flourish objectively at all, I don’t see why the Fosco must always choose the former, his agreement that in general being really happy is better than merely feeling happy notwithstanding. If we were evaluating the life in terms of how close it approximates the ideal of flourishing we would. But that is an extrinsic factor that seems irrelevant to goodness of the life for the one who lives it.

Again, it may be that some people would care quite a lot about this extrinsic factor, even to the point of biting the bullet and saying that the person must accept suffering and a subjectively horrendous life for the sake of it. But the Fosco has not agreed to this and is dialectically free to reject it without thereby being self-undermining. This rejection would only be self-undermining if the Fosco had agreed to the substantial claim that objective ‘flourishing’ is the only thing that matters in the evaluation of a life, which he has not.

Furthermore, appeals to the appearance/reality distinction will not help here. It is true that the Fosco does agree to this in general. However, it does not follow from this that he is committed to a full-fledged objective theory of his own happiness, nor does it follow that subjective considerations do not matter at all. As L.W. Sumner notes, “The subject-relativity of welfare does not entail that a subject is an infallible authority about the prudential value of her own life. Any descriptively adequate theory of welfare must preserve the possibility of
(at least some) first-person mistakes about welfare.”  

So showing that the Fosco admits that people can be wrong about how well their lives are going or how happy they are does not necessarily mean that he is agreeing to purely objective theories of happiness.

These last few points relate to the distinction between fraudulent versus authentic self-respect. Some people would care very much about being duped into thinking they had self-knowledge when they didn’t, even if they never came to know of it. But others wouldn’t. They would hold that whether their apparent self-knowledge fits Bloomfield’s technical notion of ‘knowledge’ is extrinsic factor not relevant to the intrinsic goodness of a life for the person living it. As mentioned before, Bloomfield’s argument is about what is always best, so any possible counterexample would work. If we were talking about most humans almost all the time in almost all situations, then these claims might be false or not useful.

I will develop this objection by way of counterexample. These considerations are similar to my points above relating to the college diploma of the cheater above, but this time I will focus on a related example that Bloomfield gives. “The difference between winning fair and square and ‘winning’ by cheating is the same as the difference between authentic and fraudulent self-respect.”  

Lance Armstrong was a cheater, which means that his putative success was fraudulent and not authentic, which means that his self-respect was also fraudulent.  

But the Fosco could reply that if nobody else knows and even he forgets that he cheated, then (from his perspective, which is all he need care about) the victories were (for all he cares) real and he gets full value out of them.

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94 Sumner, Welfare, Happiness, and Ethics, 42.
95 Bloomfield, The Virtues of Happiness, 90.
96 Ibid., 50.
Lance Armstrong should not get any happiness out of his cheating ‘victories’, since they cannot contribute to his self-respect because they are fraudulent. And yet it seems that there is a possible world in which he does get the benefits of his ‘victories’ and no negative effects either. Imagine that Lance Armstrong chooses to use steroids but does so in such a way that nobody ever finds out and he himself immediately forgets that he made this decision and never comes to learn about it later or manifest any psychological effects of the decision. When he goes on to win and nobody, even himself, ever comes to learn that his ‘victories’ were not genuine, it seems like these events do contribute to his well-being if we remember to stay focused only on factors intrinsic to a life. If this is correct then immorality can deliver and there are counterexamples to Bloomfield’s claim that immorality must be undermining to the happiness of its perpetrator.

Bloomfield considers the claim that cheating may be as good as truly winning, but he thinks this fails: “Even on purely hedonistic grounds, it seems better to win fairly than to use a cheating technique to fool everyone into thinking that one won fairly.”97 I have three related points to say in response to this. First, even if it is true that winning fairly is better than cheating, all else being equal, this does not mean that it would always be better for the individual to choose not to cheat no matter what. It seems that we could imagine circumstances in which the individual will get value out of the benefits of cheating or immorality that greatly outweighs the disvalue in terms of the costs. If this is possible, all-things-considered, then Bloomfield’s account does not show that an individual should never have reason to choose to cheat or be conventionally immoral.

97 Bloomfield, The Virtues of Happiness, 90-91.
Second, the Fosco may claim that anything is fair game in pursuing one’s own interest, so ‘cheating’ is not really cheating and no less ‘authentic’ than any other means to achieving the end of making one’s life go as well as possible for the one living it. One might worry that this involves disrespecting these other people, which would lead to undermining the self-respect of the Fosco. But the Fosco might not agree with Bloomfield that conventionally immoral acts are disrespecting. This will be so especially if the Fosco takes the fact that a person should do what he can to make his own life go well as the ground of respect. In that case trying to cheat someone out of something need not be seen as disrespectful by either party. The Fosco could consistently maintain that it’s fine for him to try to cheat others and also fine for others to try to cheat him.

If this is correct then we can see the error in Bloomfield’s statement that “no one has ever denied that morality tells us to be fair to others.” Similarly with his claim that even the Fosco will admit that morality tends toward the humane. Nietzsche, for example, can be interpreted as (at least at times) denying both of these claims. Utilitarianism may be fair in the sense that everyone’s well-being counts equally, but extremely unfair in the sense that one individual or group may get ‘sacrificed’ for the interests of the majority. And there are other examples we could point to in the history of philosophy.

Third, the claim that it is better to win fairly than fool everyone into thinking you won through cheating may not be true if ‘everyone’ includes oneself. In this case there would be no subjective felt difference. “Living the Good Life is not the same as looking like one is living the Good Life. If Lance Armstrong never got caught, he would nevertheless be the

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98 Bloomfield, The Virtues of Happiness, 34.
99 Ibid., 67.
fraud we all now know him to be."100 Both these sentences can be granted by the Fosco, yet they don’t seem to make the point that Bloomfield is trying to make with them. If your life looks like a good life and is qualitatively identical, both to outside observers, and also to yourself, then maybe that is just as good. If we start with a neutral setup and ask ‘How ought I to live?’ then maybe an answer that leads us to the first ‘good life’ will be just as compelling to the individual as the answer that leads to Bloomfield’s Good Life. Even if Lance Armstrong is a ‘fraud’ in one sense, this need not mean that he wouldn’t be living a life that is identical from his own point of view as the life of a non-fraud. So if we only need care about intrinsic features, such a life at least could be as good in the sense of good in itself for the one who lives it.

Now, we might want to still say that from a more objective point of view, maybe this life is not as good as it could have been. But then we’re thinking in terms of morally it’s not as good as it could have been, or it’s not as good as it could have been for all people involved, or we are considering factors that are extrinsic to a life. But that’s really a different question than what’s a Good Life for the person living it, or what makes the person living it happy, since on Bloomfield’s account they are the same thing. This difference is not about a subjective versus objective account of happiness; it’s about the individual’s well-being versus the well-being of all people involved. We can’t assume that these different considerations will always overlap. In a theory of the individual Good Life, the well-being of the individual will always be intrinsic, while the well-being of others may be extrinsic.

100 Ibid., 90.
Even if it would be better for others, or it would be better for everyone, if the person didn’t do this immoral thing and forget, that doesn’t necessarily mean it’s not better for him individually. If his actions are supposed to be aimed at the Good Life in the sense of making him happy, then even if it would have been better for others if he had not done this immoral thing, this may not make him happier than he would otherwise be if he never even comes to know of any of this. If this is correct then it’s not at all clear how knowing these facts (even if they were true) could constitute a reason for him to follow through with his actions if they won’t contribute to his happiness.

So even if it is true that it would be better all-things-considered objectively if he didn’t do this immoral thing and then forget, it’s still not necessarily true that doing so would make him happier as an individual. Maybe if he knew about these things it would make him happy, but it seems like there’s no way one could insist that it must increase his happiness to not do this thing when he wouldn’t even ever know of it. It doesn’t seem to make sense to say that it’s going to make him better off to do it if it isn’t going to affect him in any way (since he never knows of it or the choice he made). If we were forced to care about how such a life compared to an ideal life of human flourishing then such factors would have a lot more weight.

For example, if someone can commit an immoral action and not remember it while still getting the benefits of that action, it is no objection to show that there would be theoretical inconsistencies or disturbances of thought that would arise if one were aware of them. L. W. Sumner makes a similar point about justifiability requirements for happiness that applies here as well. Such a requirement “presumes to dictate to individuals how much their deviations from an ideal epistemic standpoint should matter to them. But that is for them to
decide.” If it’s not self-undermining to the individual’s own happiness to do so, then Bloomfield’s argument can’t rule it out.

Bloomfield considers an objection to this line of thinking, claiming that there is no way that the Fosco could know that such moves would be hedonically invisible such that fraudulent self-respect would be just as good as authentic self-respect. I have two quick points in reply. First, if we make the assumption that all mental states are caused by brain-states, then it follows straightforwardly that any feeling or psychological state or character trait caused by moral actions or dispositions could be arrived at by not actually performing the action that usually accompanies them. Any feelings of pleasure, pain, accomplishment, guilt, satisfaction, or whatever are created by brain-states, which themselves could be directly impressed on the brain. This could be through a scientist manipulating one’s brain, or a Nozick-like experience machine, or the person forgetting his fraud, or just randomly occurring even. If the only factors that count are those intrinsic to a life then we need not be bothered by this.

Second, it doesn’t really matter how this could be effected, or whether it really could actually be implemented in the physical world, since the possibility of it is enough to show that Bloomfield’s strong claims are unfounded. Pointing to psychological generalizations about human beings and how this works are not going to be relevant. Bloomfield needs his point to hold even for very unusual people and extreme situations. Eudaimonistic theories about people in general may not apply to Foscos, who are definitely unusual and statistically

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anomalous individuals. Bloomfield needs to be careful not to redefine terms such that his account no longer applies to every individual.

However, these considerations would be relevant to a less-than-ambitious argument, as we will see in more detail in the next chapter. If it could be shown that for basically all humans these things could not be hedonically invisible, we would have a good argument for Bloomfield’s claims for most people at least. We might also claim that current technology rules these kinds of things out of the realm of plausibility, so his conclusions might follow for now only. If our standards are relaxed from the requirement of being self-undermining, there might be some plausibility here. But Bloomfield does want to argue for the stronger claim that, for everyone, all the time, the moral choice is always the best.

I’ve tried to show in this chapter the problems that Bloomfield’s account of the Good Life runs into and how these affect whether he really succeeds in giving ambitious arguments that convince the skeptic. I’ve also given some specific criticisms of the arguments from ontology and epistemology. In the next chapter we will see if we can modify this account and these arguments in order to preserve their central thrust against the Fosco.
CHAPTER 4

RECONSTRUCTING BLOOMFIELD’S ARGUMENT

In the previous chapter I gave my arguments meant to show that Bloomfield has failed to establish his main conclusion. Bloomfield was very ambitious in what he thought his argument could accomplish, but in this chapter I will see whether we might reconstruct the overly ambitious argument and get one that might still do some work. First we will discuss what might be accomplished if we simply reinterpret Bloomfield’s argument as one saddled with a less extreme burden of proof than what he attempts to take on. We will see that this still leaves us wanting more out of the argument, and this will lead to a discussion of exactly why it is that Bloomfield failed. Specifically, I will point out three problems that I think his account faces. Then I will look at how we might try to improve and extend Bloomfield’s arguments to best meet these three problems. While I think we might make some progress through this process, I do not think we can meet Bloomfield’s very ambitious goals, for reasons that I will elaborate on below.

As we’ve seen, Bloomfield has taken on the very ambitious task of showing that the Fosco is forced into a position that turns out to be self-defeating since it undermines the Fosco’s own happiness even on his own view of the matter. I’ve given my arguments for why I don’t think this succeeds. But even if I am right so far, we might think that the argument may do some work as a less than extremely ambitious, but still good, argument. After all, few arguments (if any) can stand up to the determined skeptic if he or she is
allowed to keep so many assumptions. So it may not be much of a demerit of Bloomfield’s argument that he can’t provide a completely knockdown non-question-begging argument against the extreme skeptic.

One thing the argument may do is show some pretty serious and implausible implications of the Fosco’s view. In responding to Bloomfield’s argument, the Fosco was forced to retreat into some assumptions that, while not self-defeating, may strike many reasonable people as too high of a price to pay in order to avoid Bloomfield’s claims. For example, the argument from ontology relied on the claim that humanity was essential to the personal identity of the Fosco, and this was supposed to be the justification for treating others with respect even when we may not think that failing to do so would necessarily disrupt the individual’s own narrow self-interest. One could avoid the force of this argument if one believed that being human did not ground any respect or moral consideration at all. But rejecting humanity as the ground is an enormous cost with potentially devastating consequences. And of course few philosophers (and almost no real people) actually believe this. So even if it’s not self-defeating to reject this assumption of the argument from ontology, it may still be a strong premise in a compelling modest argument. Hence the argument does have the advantage of demonstrating this non-trivial and not immediately evident link between the humanity of others and how we treat them in relation to our own self-interest.

One might point to other implausible implications of the Fosco’s position after retreating from the argument from ontology. For example, you must think that there is nothing wrong with cheating others out of their just due, which means that there is no basis for feeling resentful when someone does it to you. One must also accept that ‘winning’
through cheating is just as good as genuinely winning. One may also have to believe that a life in which you are deceived about almost everything but never come to know it is just as good as a similar life in which your beliefs were true. So to the extent that one finds this position implausible (as most people likely will), one will think that the argument from ontology is a good argument, and that it does show a strong connection between morality and self-interest.

Bloomfield’s account might go through if we were allowed some more substantial premises about what makes for a Good Life, but the Fosco is not dialectically forced to agree to any that are not self-undermining to reject. If we were to give up on this extremely ambitious approach, there would be a lot wider pool of factors to consider, many of which would no doubt be compelling to a lot of people, and even some which would work for some skeptics. We might also be able to make some progress concerning weights, where the argument for morality would likely work for a whole lot of people a whole lot of the time. This would be a very good modest argument, even if less than Bloomfield had hoped for, where the moral choice is always the best for anyone no matter what.

However, there are two kinds of limitations to this approach as an argument against an out-and-out skeptic like the Fosco could be. For one thing, if the Fosco does not see any of these implications as being too implausible, or not as implausible as their collective denial, then he is not forced on his own grounds to agree that the argument is compelling. For someone who is willing to accept these implications, there may not be anything more to say. One can always try to explain them further, and give examples, but if these considerations are not effective, there’s nothing more the argument can do.
This is similar to a point that Thomas Nagel makes in regard to skepticism in *The Possibility of Altruism*: “no form of scepticism, whether epistemological or moral, can be shown to be impossible. The best one can do is to raise its cost, by showing how deep and pervasive are the disturbances of thought which it involves.”\(^{103}\) The Fosco certainly represents an extreme form of skepticism, and if he is allowed to keep his assumptions he would be a slippery opponent indeed. One may be able to show that certain extreme or outrageous consequences follow from some position and so push the skepticism back, but the determined skeptic can always raise doubts about the next level. This is especially so in Bloomfield’s case, where the Fosco is free to hold onto anything, however implausible it is, so long as it isn’t self-undermining to his own happiness.

This line of thinking suggests the second limitation of this kind of reply, which is that these arguments are in some sense merely preaching to the choir. The ‘costs’ of the reply to Bloomfield’s argument are accepting implications which seem disturbing or outrageous *to the person who is already moral*. Normal people already know that the interests of other people matter, and that winning fairly is just better than fraudulently ‘winning’ through cheating. If they had the benefit of a healthy education and development without any debilitating psychological problems, these kinds of reasons already affect their moral reasoning. So the ‘costs’ revealed by Bloomfield’s arguments almost seem like the things that a moral person would have to give up in order to become immoral. What we really want, and need in order to be successful in Bloomfield’s setup, are arguments that show the cost *to the skeptic*.

By looking at Bloomfield’s argument in this regard, we can see more clearly why it is that it has failed to be compelling on these terms. Bloomfield has attempted to give a dialectically neutral, non-question-begging argument against the Fosco meant to show that acting morally will always lead to the happiest life. If my arguments against Bloomfield’s account have been largely correct so far, then we see that we have uncovered three problems with this approach which explain why he did not succeed.

Problem (1): Dialectically, if all you can get the Fosco to agree to are self-interested reasons to be moral, then you can’t fully resolve all instances of conflict between self-interest and morality. Bloomfield disavows the Stoic theory of robust sufficiency, where virtue is always sufficient for an individual being happy. Bloomfield gives the example of the last man on earth: he may be virtuous, but there are some things needed for happiness that are lacking in his case. So while virtue is something of great value for the individual’s happiness, it is not the only thing of value. This leaves open the possibility that the value to be had from acting non-virtuously may, in extreme circumstances at least, outweigh the potential value that could be gotten through acting virtuously.

This conclusion may be implicit in other comments that Bloomfield makes. For example, he notes that the “hope is to help the immoralist, or the egoist, see that there are self-interested reasons for being moral. … [t]hese are not the only or the best reasons for being moral, but they are ones that immoralists and egoists can be counted on to take seriously and value.”\textsuperscript{104} However, if this is all that his arguments can establish, then it won’t be enough for his very strong conclusions; if the value of morality is only seen to be in these

\textsuperscript{104} Bloomfield, The Virtues of Happiness, 53.
types of reasons, then there could be situations in which this value (or potential disvalue) is outweighed by other value that could be obtained through immoral means.

Problem (2): If you allow non-universalizable, possibly solipsistic, ‘reasons’ into the debate, then there is nothing for the argument from ontology to bite into and force the Fosco to give up. Bloomfield has set up the debate such that he is allowing ‘moralities’ that are extremely particularistic into the game. He thinks that he can show that these accounts of what to do or how to live are nonetheless sub-optimal even on their own grounds. But these are very slippery and shifting grounds to build on. I think that if you allow these kinds of ‘moralities’ (or ‘reasons’ or ‘considerations that count in favor of a certain action’) into the neutral setup, then you can’t get their proponents to concede by their own lights.

Since the argument from ontology is trying to point out a cost to the Fosco that he must acknowledge on his own grounds, there must be something that he is forced to give up. But included in the Fosco’s position could be an extremely particularistic and/or solipsistic account of what kinds of things can count as ‘reasons’ for actions. This means that there is not enough material for the argument to grab onto, since the Fosco can always retreat further into his own position. Showing that he must ‘give up’ things that seem implausible to people outside of his own position need not count for much if he himself doesn’t regard them as implausible (or doesn’t care that they might be implausible). For example, showing that the Fosco couldn’t coherently take his humanity as grounding moral considerations while acting immorally toward other humans isn’t a cost if he doesn’t take his value to derive from his humanity. What we need (and what isn’t provided by the argument from ontology if I am right) is something that is a cost to the Fosco even on his own grounds.
Problem (3): If you start with a nearly empty and merely formalist conception of the Good Life, then there is not enough material to bridge over from the life good in itself for the one who lives it to the morally Good Life. We’ve seen that there are different senses of the question “How should I live?” Bloomfield takes it that the Good Life is the answer to this question, but there are many different scales of evaluation that we could use to measure how good a life is. The hope was that if we start with no assumptions other than structural ones, then we would find one and only one theory of the Good Life that led to the best life both for the individual and in terms of morality.

So the Fosco was allowed to start with his own take on the Good Life as the one good in itself for the one who lives it. But, as I’ve tried to argue, this starting point does not necessarily and unfailingly meet up with the Good Life as the moral life unless we take for granted some assumptions about the Good Life that are not self-defeating to reject. If this is correct, then Bloomfield has failed in his goal of providing a non-question-begging argument against the Fosco which shows that he should switch from immorality to morality on pain of being self-undermining to his own happiness even on his own grounds.

Now I will shift my focus to how we might reconstruct Bloomfield’s argument or take the idea behind it further. The reconstruction that follows is more of a sketch than a full defense, but I think that some account like this could help with respect to the first two problems and might even provide a pretty good modest argument, even if it will still not succeed ‘ambitiously’. The third problem, though, will turn out to be unresolvable, at least in the context of Bloomfield-like arguments aimed at the skeptic. First I will explain how the reconstruction might go, drawing heavily on some general considerations about agency taken from Harry Frankfurt and some Kantian arguments from Christine Korsgaard. Then I will
explain how this reconstruction is supposed to help with the three problems that Bloomfield’s account faced. A full defense of the reconstruction would go well beyond the scope of this paper, which is why I call it ‘sketchy’. The potential costs to the skeptic and how these problems would be affected by the reconstruction I do not take to be ‘sketchy’.

Bloomfield has structured his account very well in terms of framing the debate in a way that takes for granted the fewest possible assumptions or previous theoretical commitments. This has the benefit of getting the moral skeptic or extreme egoist into the debate and allowing for the possibility that the inquiry could lead in any direction without bias. If an argument within this setup could succeed, this would be the best possible result in terms of forcing the skeptic to admit that he or she has decisive reason to be moral. The goal of a reconstruction like the one I am sketching here would be to retain most of Bloomfield’s approach but to slightly change the focus of the argument from ontology. Such an argument would be nominally very similar to Bloomfield’s argument, with the difference being that ‘humanity’ will mean something a little different, as we will see.

In trying to evade the force of Bloomfield’s arguments, the Fosco was forced to give some things up. For example, if the argument from ontology is sound, then the Fosco cannot rely on his humanity to ground his taking his own interests to be overriding. To the extent that an individual finds this troubling, the argument will be convincing and will provide a good reason for living morally. But if the Fosco never did take his humanity as the ground of consideration, or if he did before hearing the argument but now no longer cares about doing so, then there is nothing important that the individual must ‘give up’. For this individual, if the argument is going to be successful it must go deeper. It must find something that he isn’t
willing to give up, or something that is costly even on his own theory. Maybe if we keep
pushing the grounds of justification further, we will hit on something that will do the trick.

If my criticisms so far have been largely correct, then Bloomfield can’t defeat Fosco-
like theories of the Good Life on their own grounds. But this requirement no doubt strikes
most people as unreasonable; nothing can defeat such a theory so it’s not a strong mark
against Bloomfield’s argument. Even if not as ambitious as Bloomfield had hoped, we might
think that showing the Fosco that his position of treating himself with respect but not others
commits him to either admitting that his treatment is based on no relevant difference (and
arbitrary hence not really reason-providing), or admitting that his own self-respect is shown
to be totally arbitrary and groundless (and hence not robust enough to justify the kind of self-
respect necessary for happiness) is enough to be a solid argument against immorality. The
idea of treating like cases alike is important here. If the Fosco retreats so much, he starts
losing his claim to really having a ground of self-respect (which, again, is necessary for
happiness even on his own view).

So the following is about what the argument from ontology (or a further argument in
its spirit if not letter) might be able to do if we give up on Bloomfield’s overly ambitious
goals. The idea is to search for the ground of self-respect. What is it that justifies the Fosco
treating himself with respect while engaging in immoral actions which demonstrate a lack of
respect for other people? If humanity can’t supply this common ground, then what can?
Presumably it can’t be nothing and still leave the Fosco with any real self-respect at all; even
the Fosco would not want his self-respect to be completely groundless, or else his self-
respect will be fraudulent even on his own account. Since self-respect is necessary for
happiness, this would force the Fosco to admit that his immorality is undermining his own
happiness. For arguments like this to work something must ground the respect of the Fosco, which also commits him to acknowledging that thing’s presence in others. If there were something like this then the Fosco would have to admit that treating others as if it wasn’t there would be self-contradictory and hence make his (putative) self-respect fraudulent.

Christine Korsgaard tries to find something like this in her book *The Sources of Normativity*. Her main aim in that book is to find the origin and authority of normativity at its most basic level. However, I think her arguments there could be useful as an extension of Bloomfield’s arguments aimed at reconciling self-interest and morality. Adopting Bloomfield’s really good neutral setup and the general frame of the argument from ontology to fit Korsgaard’s arguments as aimed against the normative skeptic might give us what we want.

Bloomfield takes humanity as the ground of justification for morality, where by ‘humanity’ he means the fact of being a member of the biological species *Homo sapiens*. Korsgaard instead takes reflective agency as the ground, which may be largely extensionally coincident with Bloomfield’s category but is different in its emphasis on rationality. She talks about reflective animals, where by ‘animal’ is meant an “entity whose nature it is to preserve and maintain its physical identity.” So the human form, in the Aristotelian sense, is to be an autonomous moral animal, which will lead to slightly different results than Bloomfield’s arguments.

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107 Ibid., 165.
Bloomfield is giving a Kantian argument, and I think it’s worth pointing out that this take on ‘humanity’ is closer to what Kant meant than the account that Bloomfield offers. “Kant’s ‘formula of humanity’ is a misnomer even on its own account since it is really about rational beings, and humans may or may not be the only rational beings.”\textsuperscript{108} “In the \textit{Groundwork}, Kant interchanges the terms ‘humanity’ and ‘rational nature’.”\textsuperscript{109} The real grounding of morality comes from rationality; humanity is a stand-in or shortcut that usually gives the same result since the only rational beings we know about (at least according to Kant) are humans. Some examples from Kant: “its [morality’s] law is so extensive in its import that it must hold not only for human beings but for all \textit{rational beings as such.”}\textsuperscript{110} A rational being is one with the capacity to set itself an end.\textsuperscript{111} “The capacity to set oneself an end – any end whatsoever – is what characterizes humanity.”\textsuperscript{112} So rational agent means a being that has the capacity to set its own ends and thereby make them valuable and normative for that individual. (‘Rational’ does not necessarily mean anything like having theoretical reason or being able to solve math problems.) Whatever else the Fosco takes himself to be, he is at least a rational agent. So if the argument shows that being a rational agent has implications for how he must treat others, this is not something he can just give up or stop caring about.

\textsuperscript{108} Joel Marks, \textit{Ought Implies Kant} (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2009), 62.


\textsuperscript{111} Ibid., 86.

\textsuperscript{112} Ibid., 522.
In any case, Korsgaard then tries to show that the person who acts immorally implicitly violates the conditions of being a reflective animal herself. I think this does a better job than humanity as biological kind in providing a real cost to the person considering immorality, and it helps us to resolve some of the problems with Bloomfield’s account. Being forced to give up being reflective agents may well carry more weight with us than being forced to give up humanity. It’s still an ontological fact whether we are the type of being who has this capacity, but it is a fact that we must regard as internal to our lives and essential to ourselves. We couldn’t lose this capacity and still be the persons we are (as we, arguably, could do with humanity as *Homo sapiens*). Moreover, just by looking for or questioning reasons for action we show that we are this type of being and must regard ourselves as such. If we weren’t this type of being, then theorizing about morality and the Good Life would be meaningless and there would never be any point in asking what we ‘should’ do.

So if the Fosco is taking part in the debate or if he deliberates about what to do, then he shows that he does regard himself as the type of being that such a theory would apply to. If this theory could be shown to imply that acts of immorality are contrary to one’s own self-respect, then he would have to see this fact as normative and binding for him on his own authority as rational agent. Hence we see that defining ‘humanity’ this way removes some outs for the Fosco trying to escape the force of the argument. If this is true, then a version of the argument from ontology refocused on rational agency or reflective animality rather than humanity may be an improvement in terms of an argument directed at the extreme skeptic.

Some general ideas about agency and caring that derive from the work of Harry Frankfurt might be helpful in terms of adumbrating where I think Bloomfield’s arguments...
can be taken. One of the conditions of being a reflective agent is the ability to take a step back from our desires or impulses and make a judgment about which should be endorsed and which should not. So to be a person in the fullest sense of a reflective agent, you must have second-order volitions (you must desire to have the desires that you actually have). This requires judging between potentially conflicting desires and deciding which ones you want to endorse and identify with. This means that if you are unable to distinguish between ‘my desiring X’ and ‘having a reason to do X’ then you are just not a person or reflective agent in the fullest sense.

This is because you aren’t actively engaging with the world or taking a part in constituting yourself. Instead you would just be the passive recipient of a string of events that happen to happen to you. “Taking ourselves seriously means that we are not prepared to accept ourselves just as we come. We want our thoughts, our feelings, our choices, and our behavior to make sense. We are not satisfied to think that our ideas are formed haphazardly, or that our actions are driven by transient and opaque impulses or by mindless decisions. We need to direct ourselves … in thoughtful conformity to stable and appropriate norms.” But the ability to distinguish between ‘my desiring X’ and really ‘having a reason to do X’ requires that you take seriously potential reasons that could derive from something that is not your own perspective or narrow self-interest. I think that this could be the bite of the argument from ontology that Bloomfield was looking for. If you don’t have a motivational structure that allows for these kinds of potential reasons, then you don’t really have ‘reasons’

113 Harry Frankfurt, _The Importance of What We Care About_ (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 16.

at all for any of your actions, so you aren’t really a robust agent after all. This would be a real cost to the skeptic, particularly if he is like the typical Fosco in priding himself on how clever and powerful he is.

Korsgaard’s arguments attempt to go deeper into what reasons are, and she will end up claiming that if you don’t accept the normativity of reasons that derive from something other than yourself, then you can’t be said to have ‘reasons’ at all. The problem of normativity in general arises from the fact that people have the ability to reflect on their own mental activities.\(^{115}\) We are aware of our impulses and desires; we can inspect them and decide whether or not we should do what they incline us to do. We have a ‘reason’ when the reflective powers (whatever those might be) decide on a course of action.\(^{116}\)

We do this through the will, which freely decides what to do through being a law for itself. For a being that is not really an agent, this ‘law’ will be to act on whatever impulse of the moment happens to successfully bring one to action. Someone like this will effectively be what Frankfurt calls a ‘wanton’, where the will does not play an active part in constituting what that being will be like.\(^{117}\) For you to be a robust agent, it is necessary that the law or principle on which your will chooses the kinds of things to accept as reasons is one that is expressive of what you take yourself to be. This is your practical identity, “a description under which you value yourself, a description under which you find your life to be worth living and your actions worth undertaking.”\(^{118}\) When we feel inclined to do something, we

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\(^{115}\) Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity*, 93.

\(^{116}\) Ibid., 97.

\(^{117}\) Frankfurt, *The Importance of What We Care About*, 16.

\(^{118}\) Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity*, 101.
ask if that presents us with a reason for actually doing that thing. We test this by seeing if a being with the practical identity that we have chosen can will that this be a law: if so then it is a reason, if not then it couldn’t be a reason.

So far the scope of the argument is still constrained by what practical identity the individual has chosen. Thus we have not yet reached distinctly moral considerations. But if the sketch of the argument is roughly correct up to now, there are some views that are ruled out, or at least shown to have implications that most will find sufficiently bad to warrant giving up those views. One such view is to think of your ‘reasons’ as not based on ‘laws’ at all. If your ‘reasons’ are extremely particularized and are only supposed to apply to you at this moment unless you happen to change your mind, then they are arbitrary and not the sort of thing that can distinguish you from a wanton or brute. These kinds of considerations just reduce to what happens to be the case with you right now and aren’t really ‘reasons’ at all.

To be a reason or law or principle, it must apply equally to two qualitatively identical but numerically distinct cases. If it’s possible to hold that for person X consideration Z counts as a reason but does not for Y, where X and Y are identical in every way relevant to Z, then Z is arbitrary and can’t be a reason. At least it can’t be a reason of the sort that warrants one’s being a real agent.

The idea of having a will or being an agent requires that you do not merely happen to be the location where a desire is acted on or not; rather you as the agent take an active role in making this happen. You just aren’t able to make sense of this distinction if there is no regularity or principle that informs your decisions. “[I]f all of my decisions were particular and anomalous, there would be no identifiable difference between my acting and an assortment of first-order impulses being causally effective in or through my body. And then
there would be no self – no mind – no me – who is the one who does the act.” So in order for something that happens to be an act of an agent there must be something general or law-like already factored in. This means that particularized ‘reasons’ are already ruled out, with no theoretical commitments except that of being a robust agent. This is something that a Fosco is very unlikely to want to give up, and one that may have more bite than giving up Bloomfield’s sense of ‘humanity’.

In order to be a reflective agent, you must have reasons for action, which requires having a practical identity of some kind. To give up every possible practical identity is to give up having reasons for anything you do. So the commitment to practical identities comes from the value you place on “your identity simply as a human being, a reflective animal who needs reasons to act and to live.” This means that if you are to value anything at all, you must value your own humanity, or nature as a reflective animal. So our identity as humans ‘stands behind’ our practical identities and hence our having reasons (or wills) at all: “[i]f we do not treat our humanity as a normative identity, none of our other identities can be normative, and then we can have no reasons to act at all.” From this it follows that humanity (our identities as reflective animals) is inescapable and carries with it in itself certain reasons and obligations (if you care about being a robust agent at all).

We can see that this has implications for how we are able to respect ourselves. We often respect things with wills, things that are responsible for what they do. This idea makes

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119 Korsgaard, The Sources of Normativity, 228.
120 Ibid., 121.
121 Ibid., 123.
122 Ibid., 129.
sense to us and we do it all the time so naturally that we don’t even think about it. But it doesn’t really make sense to say that you have respect for something that has no will. A car is a complex machine that is very useful to us when it works well, though of course it can break down. When this happens we may get frustrated, and we may even talk to the car like it is a person. (Even more so with something like Siri, the app that gives voice to the iPhone.) But we never think that since the car often breaks down we lose respect for the car. We may think less of it, call it a piece of junk, or pretend that we are angry at it. But the idea of respect does not really make sense here; it’s not ‘up to’ the car whether it works or not. (Even though Siri talks and seems to respond to what you say, she has no say in what happens but is merely part of the location where things are happening.) So if we cannot any longer think of ourselves as having wills and being (part of) the cause of what we do, then the idea of self-respect starts to break down.

So far in the argument it might be thought that this shows how the individual must value his or her own humanity, but not necessarily that of other people. It seems clear how damage to my ability to think of myself as an agent undermines my self-respect. But it’s not so clear how thinking of others in this way need undermine my own respect. To extend the argument to other people (and hence distinctly moral reasons), Bloomfield focused on the fact that some feature (being a member of Homo sapiens) was shared between the individual and the potential victim of immorality. Not acknowledging this fact or having erroneous or arbitrary judgments about it leads you to not value things as you ought and so undercuts your self-respect which is necessary for happiness. Korsgaard starts focused less on these aspects and more on the nature of reasons and practical rationality, which are necessary if you are to live well and flourish as a reflective animal. Ultimately, though, this comes around to the
same thing applied to agency. Korsgaard thinks that if you fail to treat others in a way that values or respects their humanity, then your entire structure of value and reasons is undermined. Consequently, your self-respect loses its justification, which negatively affects your happiness.

This is because reasons are not essentially private but rather are public and shareable. The best evidence for this is that we are constantly exchanging reasons and meanings; we do form plans and intentions together all the time. “If these reasons really were essentially private, it would be impossible to exchange or share them. So their privacy must be incidental or ephemeral; they must be inherently shareable.”123 If we are to value things and have reasons, then we have to value and respect the idea that reflective agents must have some practical identity in general. This means that we must acknowledge practical identities as reason-giving abstracted from any characteristic that marks a practical identity as ours. We must acknowledge the practical identity of someone-in-general; that is, any reflective agents irrespective of whether they happen to be me or not.

So the upshot of the extended argument is that since a condition of valuing ourselves is that we respect other reflective agents, the Fosco is shown to be committed to a schema of value and reasons that is ultimately undermined by immorality. One can hardly live a good or happy life in such a state. Therefore we see that, similar to what Bloomfield’s original argument sought to achieve, immorality is shown to undermine the perpetrator’s own happiness even from his own point of view.

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123 Korsgaard, The Sources of Normativity, 135.
The argument relies on the idea that if there is a process or capacity that leads to authority and/or the giving of reasons that you find in your own mind or self, then you must accept that process (all else being equal) wherever you find it. Otherwise you’re not really accepting it in your own, since then it would be just the fact that it is you and not the process which justifies your accepting it. (You may try to deceive yourself that you are accepting it, and even succeed in thinking it to be the case, but you can’t really do so.) But of course this would be arbitrary or not really reason-giving; the real ‘reason’ you accept authority in your own case would then be an arbitrary thing, like ‘because I just wanted to’, ‘because it benefits me’, or ‘because I get to decide’. So it wouldn’t be based on a rational process or the capacity to set ends after all. If this capacity gives reasons or confers authority or bestows value on your ends, then it must do so by itself, based on its own internal factors. The fact that it is your applying it here and now is an extrinsic factor that could not be what confers authority to it. Otherwise you would be just a passive observer and not a self-constituting agent. It has to hold for anyone relevantly similar to you, or else it just isn’t a real reason.

Hence reasons must be general in at least this minimal way. But what makes for relevant similarity is just the bare fact that you are the type of being that uses the process or capacity to confer authority. This is shared by all rational agents. So you must accept that authority always, or else you’re not even accepting it in your own case. If this process or capacity is the basis of self-respect, then if you don’t respect others who have it, you can’t really be respecting it in yourself. The point is not an epistemological one; it’s not that you can’t know or recognize your own self-respect if you don’t know or recognize it in others. The idea is that you just can’t actually respect yourself as a rational agent if you don’t respect the capacity to set ends for what it is in itself.
There is no basis of self-respect except for those beings that can take things to be valuable. There can be no self-respect without a self, and the only self that can take itself to be valuable is one who is able to set ends for herself which are thereby normative for her. The ends are valuable because the agent makes them her ends and thus gives herself a reason to care about them. A rock can’t take itself to be valuable. A leaf can’t. Maybe a dog or a chimp or an alien could, which is why rational agency gets deeper than humanity as *Homo sapiens* and why the two may not be equivalent.

If I am to have the type of self-respect necessary to ground or justify a happiness worth having, it must be based on my rational agency, my ability to set ends for myself. This is something we respect just in virtue of its being the thing it is; as Kant said, a rational agent with a Good Will is the only thing of unconditional worth. So we accept the authority of rational agency because it is the only thing that could confer authority. I must see my ends as coming from myself, as normative for me, and as worth having or doing. In a sense, what ends I choose don’t matter, so long as they are the types of things capable of performing these functions. It follows that if I denigrate this capacity, I am denigrating something essential to myself, something which is deeply necessary for me to be the type of being that could have self-respect. I cannot pretend that I don’t value this capacity and yet still conceive of myself as a rational agent who has reasons for what I do or believe.

But others have this capacity just as much as I do. This is the how we make the link between self-respect and respect for others. It’s not the fact that my ends are *mine* which grounds my self-respect (again, it can’t be that, or else they’re arbitrary and not really reason-giving). Rather, it is the capacity to set those ends in the first place. Hence I see that all rational agents possess the same ground of respect. If I don’t care about the ground of respect
in your case, then, since it is the very same ground for my own self-respect, I am showing that I do not accept the authority to ground respect based on that capacity, so that capacity can’t be the ground of my own self-respect. But if this is something that even the skeptic admits grounds self-respect, then I must admit that my sense of self-respect would be arbitrary or groundless. Since this self-respect is necessary for my well-being, I am therefore acting against my own self-interest, whether I know it or not.

So the idea with the argument from ontology is that even if I am like the skeptic or extreme egoist and I start out thinking that only my own well-being matters, I see that I still have reason to refrain from acting immorally due to considerations of self-respect. Bloomfield’s version made the link through humanity as *Homo sapiens*, while the reconstruction makes the link through humanity as rational agent or reflective animal. To briefly highlight again the difference between the two approaches, and why I think mine is an improvement, the Fosco may coherently hold that being a member of *Homo sapiens* is external or inconsequential to his own well-being. Since we can only appeal to factors that make a life good in itself for the one living it without begging the question, this need not be self-undermining. But he just can’t do that for rational agency or reflective animality; if you’re engaged in the debate about morality or the Good Life, then you are the type of being that this theory applies to. So if my argument works, there is no escape for the Fosco.

Since I am proposing this account as an argument aimed at the skeptic, it is worth pointing out briefly how a skeptic could try to avoid the force of this argument. I merely mention these as some of the ways that the argument could be avoided, and to point out what extreme things must be refuted if we wanted to have a knockdown argument against the most extreme of skeptics. First, the skeptic could claim that there is no description under which he
cares to value himself or thinks his life will be worth living. If this were true, then there would be no reason to value any practical identity that gives reasons for acting. Since he does not value his own humanity, not valuing that of others will not undermine his own schema of value and reasons (since he really has none). It’s not clear what to say in response to this, but it is hardly an independent reason for thinking that the account sketched above is false.

Second, the skeptic could claim to not care about being a wanton as opposed to being a reflective agent. If a person does not care about being a passive observer as opposed to a robust agent, and it isn’t always self-undermining to one’s own happiness to do so, then he or she will not see this as a problem. It may be that, in certain extreme circumstances, it at least could be better to be the former rather than the latter. For example, it may be that in a forced decision between a wretched life of real but nearly always frustrated agency (say a terminally ill patient or someone with severe mental disabilities) and a very pleasant life in an experience machine where it falsely seems to you that you are a very successful agent, some people would choose the latter. It seems false to say that an incurably mentally disabled person lives a better life if he strives and fails painfully at being an agent rather than accepting whatever pleasurable mental states he is able to achieve. This almost never applies in real life, of course, but it is a logical possibility which shows that the account may not always apply to every situation.

Third, the skeptic doesn’t accept any reasons at all. There’s not much to say in response to this either. Korsgaard’s argument does depend on the idea that practical rationality is possible, so if this isn’t true then the argument fails. But then this skeptic is

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not really *debating* you, and he’s certainly not giving (or even trying to give) you a *reason* to think the account is false. And not being able to convince this skeptic is not really a demerit for the argument; an argument can’t be expected to convince someone who doesn’t even believe in *convincing*.

Fourth, the skeptic claims to not care about anything at all (i.e. he is a nihilist). Korsgaard’s arguments are transcendental in that they depend on some schema of value, so if nothing is of value they fail. But if ‘nothing matters’ is true then that fact doesn’t matter either, and who can say why the nihilist brought it up? I’m trying to not be flippant here, but most of these ways of avoiding the argument are mere logical possibilities, and pointing out that they are implications is enough to show that one ought to see them as real costs.

Fifth, the skeptic may well think that he is a reflective animal, but that no one else is (i.e. he is a solipsist). It may not be obviously self-undermining to think that you are the only reflective agent in existence. But such a way of life is hardly even imaginable to us, and seems impoverished to an extreme degree such that it isn’t even a *human* life at all. “Human beings are social animals in a deep way. It is not just that we go in for friendship or prefer to live in swarms or packs. The space of linguistic consciousness – the space in which meanings and reasons exist – is a space that we occupy together.”\(^\text{125}\) Surely the skeptic who has to deny that this space exists has paid one of the dearest costs possible.

So there are some (logically possible) ways to escape the force of this extended ontological argument. Hence we see that these arguments can’t get us the ‘ambitious’ knockdown arguments against the skeptic, no ‘Holy Grail’ of moral philosophy. However,

\(^{125}\) Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity*, 145.
it’s hard to imagine an actual person who wouldn’t find one or more of these implications extremely troubling. And if the account sketched above is accurate in terms of showing what the alternative to accepting the force of the arguments must be, we have certainly made clear some serious costs of doing so.

I now want to return to the three problems that I claimed face Bloomfield’s account to see if our extended argument has fared any better. I think that this extension to the argument (or maybe it’s better to think of it as an addition that works alongside Bloomfield’s account) does have some advantages. In the end I think it will fail as an ambitious argument, since I think that no argument of this kind can entirely succeed in the extremely ambitious setup in which Bloomfield has chosen to frame the debate. However I also think that it may be a pretty good modest argument. I hope that the brief discussion to follow makes clear what the (extremely high) costs of rejecting this account are, and also that it will show at least some reasons exactly why it is that the more ambitious attempt cannot succeed.

Problem (1): Dialectically, if all you can get the Fosco to agree to are self-interested reasons to be moral, then you can’t fully resolve all instances of conflict between self-interest and morality. The advantage of Korsgaardian extensions in this regard is that they are not based on the particular interests of the individual at all. The argument attempts to show that, if we are to be agents and have reasons at all, then there are certain ways that we just must think about the relation between ourselves and others. (In a sense, I guess, this is an interest of the individual, but not a particular one; more like a precondition for being a person or having any interests at all.) It’s not supposed to be a decision procedure that weighs conflicting reasons or types of reasons; rather it’s attacking the very idea that a Fosco could have ‘reasons’ at all.
So, presumably, weighting and costs are not going to be as much of a problem here. However, Bloomfield does make the strong claim that being unfailingly moral will always result in the best life possible for the individual, so there should never be any conflict between morality and one’s own self-interest. While Korsgaard’s arguments do move a long way toward the reconciliation of self-interest and morality, they do not entail that they can never conflict. Similar to my criticisms of Bloomfield, it’s hard to see how undetected (by everyone including the agent) immorality need always damage the quality of life for the individual. For Korsgaard there could even be acts that don’t conform to the demands of morality which are known by the agent. This problem arises not because our agency or grasp on reasons is unstable or incomplete, but because it is stable.\textsuperscript{126} We know that making an exception one time will not ruin our practical identities or undermine our whole schema of values and reasons. So even if we know that we cannot make immorality our law or principle, it is at least possible that a circumstance could arise in which we might be able to derive great individual benefit by ignoring our principles (and especially if we knew that we would not feel any psychological effects of the action).

If being immoral threatens your ability to conceive of yourself (and be) a rational agent, you can’t make it your principle or choose the immoral action every time. But you may be able ‘get away with it’ sometimes in some situations without threatening your agency. There seems to be an incoherence in the skeptic saying “I am a rational agent, but I act on a theory according to which there really are no such things as reasons.” An incoherence or inconsistency in a theoretical context may not always be self-undermining to

\textsuperscript{126} Korsgaard, \textit{The Sources of Normativity}, 103.
the well-being of the person who holds onto that belief. But in this case incoherence is self-undermining, since we are in the practical realm of what the person should do. However, it also seems that there does not have to be any incoherence in “I’m a rational agent, but the life best for me does not necessarily correspond to the life of the ideal rational agent.” If this is correct, then it is not impossible that exceptions could exist where engaging in actions that are not consistent with being an ideal rational agent could nevertheless not be self-undermining to the happiness of the individual.

This means that even at their best, arguments like this can’t fully resolve all potential conflicts between self-interest and morality as Bloomfield had hoped. Whether or not this is a demerit will depend on whether one finds a full resolution desirable or possible in moral theories. Also, of course, even if it is a fact that we can’t convince the most radical skeptic that self-interest and morality never conflict even in the most outrageous circumstances, this hardly shows that they ever do in real-world situations, or that it would ever be reasonable to act on this assumption. These considerations also help to show that in order to make full resolution work in arguments like this, we would need a theory of the Good Life in which a person’s life is always made less good (for the individual) even when any transgressions or inconsistencies are never known. This would require some kind of extrinsic standard that a life could be measured against and made worse (for the individual) for failing to fully meet. (More on this in the discussion of problem (3).)

Problem (2): If you allow non-universalizable, possibly solipsistic, ‘reasons’ into the debate, then there is nothing for the argument from ontology to bite into and force the Fosco to give up. The idea of Korsgaard’s arguments is that such non-universalizable ‘moralties’ don’t work or provide any reasons on their own grounds, since they end up undermining the
very idea of a ‘reason’ at all. If successful, this is the bite that I’ve argued was lacking in the argument from ontology: a direct cost not to the moralist but to the Fosco. Of course, if we are thinking of these arguments in severely ambitious terms, then the Fosco would be dialectically allowed to give up on ‘having reasons’ or ‘being a rational agent’ as long as it isn’t self-undermining to his own happiness to do so. And I think that, absent a theory of the Good Life that includes more substantial assumptions, we can’t show that this self-undermining would always be the case. So even in the case of the extended argument, we haven’t got all that we wanted ambitiously, even though we have shown some real costs to the Fosco.

Problem (3): If you start with a nearly empty and merely formalist conception of the Good Life, then there is not enough material to bridge over from the life good in itself for the one who lives it to the morally Good Life. This is the problem that I don’t think can be fixed by Korsgaardian extensions of Bloomfield’s arguments (at least in terms of ‘ambitious’ arguments). Since we can’t non-question-beggingly show that self-interested considerations and moral considerations never conflict in every possible circumstance, we haven’t succeeded in showing that the moral action is always the one that most maximizes the individual’s happiness. For example, in extreme situations there may be undetected acts of immorality that do not undermine the individual’s sense of his own self-respect since he never has any negative psychological effects from them. For this to work, we need the further premise that things which would undermine the individual’s own sense of self-respect if she knew of them still lessen her happiness even if she could never know of them. But this is a premise that is not self-undermining to reject from a neutral setup, so the Fosco is free to not allow it to be assumed. So if we want a knockdown ambitious argument against the Fosco we
will have to fail with these types of arguments. Of course, this premise may well be true. Maybe it could also be supported by other arguments. But in terms of what this argument alone can do against the skeptic, it seems that we can’t assume this premise. If so, then this would be a limitation of this neutral setup that could not be overcome without some other factors taken into account.

Perhaps an example will help clarify what I mean here. The point of the example is to show that what is best for an individual human being may not conform to what is best for the ideal or perfect human being, or the ideal rational agent. Since this is a factor that is extrinsic to the life of the individual, a life good in itself for the one who lives it will not always align with one that more accords with some objective standard. If it is possible for there to be a human being like this, then Bloomfield’s argument (and the reconstruction) would not work for this individual given the way he is actually constituted and the facts about his actual life.

We will take as our example George Costanza from the 90s TV sitcom Seinfeld. On basically any account of happiness or the Good Life George is an unhappy person. “His miserable existence is alleviated only rarely by even the most transient happiness; even in such cases, we see that George’s joy (usually centering on some victory over a perceived enemy) is forced and hollow. … George is a failure, a flop, a non-starter, a paradigm of inefficacy, sloth, and incontinence.”127 George claims at one point that “I come from a long line of quitters. My father was a quitter. My grandfather was a quitter. I was raised to give up.”128 Given the sad facts about George’s upbringing, education, and genetic makeup, his

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128 Larry David, “The Old Man,” Seinfeld, season 4, episode 18, directed by Tom Cherones, aired
actual psychology and real opportunities are not at all in accord with the ideal (or even average) standards about what a good human life should be.

George seems to have no trouble with his cheating/immorality. He claims that “I am in and out of my personnel file at work all the time.” His friend expresses shock and he replies “Hey, I’ve kept the same job for more than two years. It’s not luck.”129 The obvious usual contrast with luck is hard work, but the joke is that he means cheating. So, from his perspective, his life need not be any less good if he is successful at obtaining his goals through immorality. George lacks virtues of any kind, and a virtue-based or eudaimonistic theory of the Good Life (like Bloomfield’s) would have to say that not only is George not happy, he just couldn’t be happy given the way he is.

If our theory of the Good Life is eudaimonism in the sense of a life being better to the extent that it tracks the ideal of human flourishing, then this seems correct. But the Fosco has not agreed to this account of ‘eudaimonism’ or ‘flourishing’. Given George’s actual (tragic) circumstances, it may be that his way of flourishing is very different than the norm. Appeals to psychological generalizations would be irrelevant here. The same would apply in terms of the reconstruction focusing on reflective agency. If a life were automatically worse in itself for not more closely approximating the ideal life of a reflective animal or rational agent, then we would have a justification for why George’s life must be worse. But that claim is more than can be secured by the reconstructed argument (at least on its own). Again, since there is

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129 Larry David, “The Package,” Seinfeld, season 8, episode 5, directed by Andy Ackerman, aired October 17, 1996 (New York: Fox, 2007), DVD.
no incoherence and everything is internal to the life, it is up to the individual whether to care about this or not.

It could be that the best way for George to live a life good in itself for the one who lives it is through what Bloomfield would call immorality. That is, we could imagine a possible world in which George is constantly achieving victory over his perceived enemies (or at least he thinks so and never comes to know that he is deceived), or all the external things line up such that he is often feeling elation, etc. Since George’s own well-being would not be furthered by trying to align with the ideal human or rational agent, this may be the best he can do given his situation. And this regardless of whether or not his life is also morally good, or has good consequences for others, or is the life an ideal reasoner would choose to live, or does well on some other scale of value regarding lives and what makes them good. The reconstructed argument is not saying: “Here is a theory of the best life for an ideal rational agent; you are a rational agent; so your life goes better the closer it approximates this ideal.” When put in this explicit form, it is clear that this would rely on a factor external to the life of the individual.

When considering whether or not George could have a life that is good in itself for him, it is important not to think of it as “Would I enjoy this life?” or “Would you, as you are presently constituted with your desires and psychological makeup, think of George’s life as a happy life?” The point is whether he would (rightly) think so, given the way he is actually constituted; facts about how someone other than him would view it seem irrelevant. If so, then it seems like, even if the considered moral judge or ideal reasoner would think that he was not living a more ideally happy life, it’s really not up to him to decide whether George’s life is happy or worth living from his own first-person-perspective. And again, like the
classical music example from the previous chapter, the fact of the ideal judge’s decision does not necessarily constitute a reason for George himself to change his life.

This would not work if someone thought that a life with an undetected fraudulent basis of self-respect is always worse than a similar life with an authentic basis of self-respect. But this means that he or she would have to be judging the worth of a life based on something that would always be invisible from his or her own perspective. For some people this no doubt holds nonetheless; we can imagine people who would rather have a life worse from their own perspective than one that seems much better to them throughout their whole existence but falls short of some external ideal perspective. For them Bloomfield’s account will seem correct. But we can just as easily imagine some people who hold the opposite view; a life is good for the individual only on the basis of things internal to that life, and whether or not a life matches up with something outside of itself is an irrelevant external factor that the individual shouldn’t care about.

So we would need a theory of the Good Life which holds that undetectably fraudulent grounds of self-respect or undetectable inconsistencies in our schema of value and reasons lessen the individual’s happiness even if he or she never comes to know of them. Many people would no doubt agree to this premise (I do), and for them the argument might work. But presumably the Fosco would not and it’s not clear how this would have to always be self-undermining. This means in the context of Bloomfield’s account that assuming this premise for a theory of the Good Life would be question-begging.

This is a premise that many people no doubt accept, and there may be other ethical arguments that could bolster this premise. But we can’t use this premise independently in Bloomfield-like arguments. We could only do that without begging the question if these
other arguments were self-undermining for the skeptic to reject, but most arguments in moral philosophy do not even try to accomplish this ambitious task. If this is true then we’ve come up against a real limit in arguments like this, and we may have gone as far as we can. So even if the argument may still be a pretty good modest argument, it doesn’t work as an ambitious argument to convince the extreme skeptic in all situations (which task is probably too much to ask for anyway).
CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

We’ve seen that the maneuvers the Fosco had to make in order to avoid the extension to the argument may work dialectically if he is allowed to keep many of his assumptions. But of course this is very different than saying that the Fosco’s position need be seen as reasonable or desirable. And indeed, few would be tempted to actually hold such a position. Also, many of the supposed counterexamples, while not logically impossible, would be seen as ridiculous by many. Maybe in the wildest of implausible counterfactual situations something like this might be true, but it’s extremely unlikely that anything remotely like these situations would ever obtain in the actual world for real humans. Nor would we be justified in acting as if something like this was or could be applicable to real life.

I’d like to mention two possible outcomes of this paper, or things my account would achieve if it were successful. First, effectively, you are left with a nearly full resolution where the best thing is the moral thing for almost all real humans in almost every situation that obtains in the actual world. Something that established this would be a very good argument. Also, further arguments or accounts of the Good Life may be able to bridge this ‘gap’. However, they would be different arguments with different setups, burdens of proof, and theoretical commitments. The argument from ontology is not trying to prove all that there is to the correct account of morality or the Good Life or self-respect, but only what we can succeed at convincing the skeptic without assuming any other external premises. Second, the
reason for this is because the extension reaches the limits of what Bloomfield-like arguments can do (at least in terms of decisively convincing the extreme skeptic), and also shows what else would be needed for a full resolution.

If my account is largely correct then my analysis of Bloomfield’s argument has clarified some minimal assumptions that are needed in a eudaimonistic account of morality and the Good Life in order to make the link between the two perspicuous to the skeptic. This is an achievement since it explains the intuitive pre-theoretical connection between the two that most normal people already implicitly endorse. It also serves to make more obvious the costs of denying that this connection holds, which is likely something that some skeptics did not previously realize or feel the force of. However, my analysis also shows why a super-ambitious argument like Bloomfield’s must fail to completely convince the extreme skeptic; though whether this failure is really that much of a demerit will depend on how seriously we want to take such skepticism.
REFERENCES


